

# DIALOGUES CONCERNING CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT (PART ONE)

*Ted Turnau* \*

In this two-part essay, the author addresses the subject of Christian cultural engagement in a post-Christian context. In Part One (*Foundations 70*), the author establishes that cultures of the West can be characterised as post-Christian. He then explores the issue of engagement through a series of dialogues with different characters: 1) the Knight, who represents a political approach to cultural change, 2) the Gardener, who represents the Benedict Option espoused by conservative writer Rod Dreher, and 3) the Member of the Loyal Opposition, who represents the posture of “faithful presence” espoused by sociologist James Davison Hunter. Part Two (in *Foundations 71*) gathers the various characters for a round-table discussion. After pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each, the author lays out his own approach which focuses on imaginative cultural engagement using the arts and entertainment. He explores the issue of same-sex marriage as a case study, and the reconciliation between gay activist Shane Windemeyer and American Christian businessman Dan Cathy as an example of winsome engagement in which each discovered a common humanity in the other. Our goal is a cultural engagement that is an analogue to that kind of winsome reconciliation that creates space within which estranged parties can meet, or what the author calls “planting oases”. He then briefly considers two examples of this in the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, and U2’s Superbowl performance in February 2002.

## *Introduction: The Post-Christian World We’re Living In*

This is a chapter (or maybe several) for a work in progress about the Christian imagination in a post-Christian world. It examines how we can use the imagination to engage post-Christian culture creatively and positively. What follows assumes that the reader is already convinced that it is our biblical duty and privilege to engage post-Christian culture. The real question is: How?

For those who remain unconvinced that cultural engagement is a large part of our Christian calling, here are the points I touch upon elsewhere:

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1. Jesus calls us into cultural engagement. In John 17:14, Jesus not only acknowledged that his disciples are in the world (but not of it). He called them *into* the world.
2. Though Christians are a pilgrim people, we have found our (temporary) home here in a culture we share with non-Christians. We are called to work for its good (see God's letter to the exiled Israelites in Jer. 29).
3. Christ's lordship extends to culture. Dualistic thinking that would separate culture and "spirituality", and so withdraw from culture actually undermines Jesus' claim as Lord of all creation.
4. The cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26-28 persists because culture is the necessary context for gospel proclamation.
5. There seems to be Scriptural support for the continuation of present cultural goods in the new creation (*contra* the radical Two Kingdoms model).

If you need more detail than that (it's where the devil lives, right?), you will have to wait for the book itself (and pray for the manuscript's speedy completion).

So let us assume there is a biblical case to be made in favour of cultural engagement. Jesus called us into "the world", and if we wish to honour his lordship over all creation, we cannot be indifferent and withdrawn concerning culture. We need to be culturally engaged if we wish to bring truth and healing to the world around us. But what does engaging culture mean? Assuming that we are to bring healing and light to the world we live in, how should we do that (to the extent that we can)?

The answer to that question depends, of course, on what sort of world we are trying to change. What sort of world do we live in? How is Christianity faring in our world? It seems obvious to me that the West (North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand)<sup>1</sup> should be characterised as "post-Christian". And it is becoming more "post" with every passing year. Allow me to cite some statistics to back that assertion up.

A recent Pew Research Center study on the future of world religions found that the percentage of the world population that identifies as Christian will likely remain steady up until 2050 (31.4%). The centre of gravity of the Christian world, however, is moving south and west, from North America and Europe to Latin America, Africa and Asia.<sup>2</sup> In the global North and West,

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<sup>1</sup> Australia and New Zealand, countries with deep cultural ties to the UK, tend to follow British, rather than Asian, cultural patterns. For brevity's sake, Australia and New Zealand will be considered to be part of the cultural West.

<sup>2</sup> See "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050," *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life* website, 2 April 2015, available online at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/> (accessed 6 February

Christianity is predicted to continue in a slow decline. This prediction is borne out by the much-discussed recent growth of the “religious nones” (those who choose no religious affiliation). Some specifics:

- Between 2007 and 2014, the percentage of Americans who identified as Christian dropped from 78.4% to 70.6%, a decline of 7.8%. During the same period, the religious nones (including atheists and agnostics) grew from 16.1% to 22.8%, an increase of 6.7%. More alarming, the religious nones make up more than a third of “Millennials” (those born from 1981 to 1996).<sup>3</sup> The future growth of the nones seems all but certain. (During this same period, non-

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2016). See also Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”, 12 May 2015, available online at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> (accessed 27 January 2016). The decline in Christian population was sharpest among Catholics and Mainline Protestants. Evangelicals remained steady or suffered only a slight decline. See also “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One in Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation”, *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* website, <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx#growth> (accessed 14 January 2013); and Heidi Glenn, “Losing Our Religion: The Growth of the ‘Nones’”, *National Public Radio* website, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/01/11/169164840/losing-our-religion-the-growth-of-the-nones?ft=1&f=1014&sc=tw> (accessed 14 January 2013).

Sociologist Rodney Stark believes that the significance of the “rise of the nones” has been overblown. He notes that during the years the nones were increasing, church attendance remained steady. He concludes that the new nones are drawn mostly from people who previously *identified* themselves with a faith, but didn’t actually practice it (e.g. they weren’t attending church, temple or synagogue). In this case, the rise of the nones is actually a period of faith-clarification. Those who weren’t truly committed to their faith simply stopped identifying with the faith they didn’t practice. See his book *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious Than Ever* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2015), cited in Arthur C. Brooks, “The Fate of American Religion”, *American Enterprise Institute*, 7 March 2016, available online at <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-fate-of-american-religion/> (accessed 10 March 2016).

So should Evangelicals breathe a sigh of relief? Not exactly. The phenomenon of identifying with a religion without attending church has been researched in Britain by sociologist Grace Davie. In Britain, since 1945, church attendance dropped, though many still identified as Christian. She calls it “believing without belonging”. But more recent demographic data from Britain (see below) shows what happens next: those who believe without belonging over time simply stop believing as well. See Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), and “Europe: The Exception that Proves the Rule?” in Peter Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI/Washington: Eerdmans/Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999). So even if Stark is right, the rise of the religious nones indicates (perhaps a generational) weakening of religious practice in the West. It is a characteristic of a post-Christian West.

Christian religious in America grew 1.2%, probably due to immigration.)

- Between 2001 and 2011, the proportion in England and Wales who identified as Christian declined from 71.1% to 59.3%, an 11.8% drop. During the same period, those who claimed no religious affiliation grew from 14.8% to 25.1% of the population, a 10.3% increase. All other non-Christian religious faiths grew, with Muslims increasing from 3% to 4.8%.<sup>4</sup>
- In Australia, those who identified as Christians declined slightly from 63.9% to 61.1% (continuing the decline from 96.1% held in 1901). During the same period, the non-affiliated rose from 18.7% to 22.3%.<sup>5</sup>

Demographically, Christians still comprise a majority or significant minority in each area, though the numbers continue to trend steadily downward.<sup>6</sup> But that is not the most important storyline. The centres of cultural power – media and entertainment companies, government, judiciary and educational institutions – either treat the Christian faith indifferently, or they are actively hostile to its claims. This has had a remarkable influence on the direction of our culture (the legalisation of gay marriage in the United States and Ireland being only the latest and most technicolour public rejection of Christian

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<sup>4</sup> Office for National Statistics, “Religion in England and Wales 2011: Changing Picture of Religious Affiliation over Last Decade”, available online at <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html#tab-Changing-picture-of-religious-affiliation-over-last-decade> (accessed 27 January 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Australia Bureau of Statistics, “2011 Census Reveals Hinduism as Fastest Growing Religion”, 21 June 2012, available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/CO-61> (accessed 27 January 2016). See also idem, “1301.0 – Year Book Australia 2006: Religious Affiliation”, 24 January 2007, available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/bb8db737e2af84b8ca2571780015701e/bfdda1ca506d6cfaca2570de0014496e!OpenDocument> (accessed 27 January 2016); and idem, “4102.0 - Australian Social Trends, Nov 2013: Losing My Religion?” 17 March 2014, available online at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30Nov+2013> (accessed 27 January 2016). According to the Pew Research Center, all of these trends will likely continue up to 2050 as the centre of gravity of the Christian population continues to shift south and east. See their study, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050,” available online at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/> (accessed 28 January 2016).

<sup>6</sup> According to a recent *Spectator* article, the recent demographic data shows Christians in Britain to be for the first time in history a minority (44% versus 48% of “nones”). Further, if the rate of decline continues, Christianity may be extinct in Britain by 2067 (apocalyptic in tone, but unlikely). See “Britain Really Is Ceasing To Be a Christian Country”, *Spectator*, 28 May 2016, available online at <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/05/britain-really-is-ceasing-to-be-a-christian-country/> (accessed 30 May 2016).

norms).<sup>7</sup> In terms of cultural tone and texture, we can speak of North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand as broadly post-Christian. In terms of overall cultural influence, to use Vermon Pierre's vivid image, Christians are like the kid who always gets chosen last on the playground for the game (if he is chosen at all). Christians are largely irrelevant to the game that's being played.<sup>8</sup> Further, sociologist James Davis Hunter says that Christians in the West now face two major cultural challenges: difference (our culture now houses many incompatible perspectives on what is true and good) and dissolution (as we lose hold of common meanings, words like "goodness" and "freedom" break free from their old definitions, making cultural debate tortured, elusive, attenuated).<sup>9</sup> All of the meanings we used to assume have changed. We are in, quite literally, a different world. *That* is what I mean by post-Christian culture.

I don't mention these statistics and social changes to frighten or inspire handwringing. The sky is not falling. The collapse of the Christian church is not imminent. As G. K. Chesterton famously quipped, "At least five times... the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Christians need to be clear about the world in which they dwell today. The Western world is made up of cultures that are increasingly disenchanted with the gospel and the Christian imaginary landscape (its values, hopes, expectations and moral orientation). Christians have become, in effect, missionaries to their own cultures, "exilic disciples" to use Keller's phrase.<sup>11</sup> In short, we're not in the driver's seat of our own cultures anymore. Christians still want to make the world a better place. We want to see God's *shalom* (peace, flourishing, justice) brought to bear. We want to see truth proclaimed. We want to see broken lives and

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<sup>7</sup> See Hunter Baker, "Can Christians Change the World after *Obergefell*?" in Collin Hansen, ed., *Revisiting "Faithful Presence: To Change the World Five Years Later"* (Deerfield, IL: Gospel Coalition Press, 2015), e-book available online at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/revisiting-faithful-presence-to-change-the-world-five-years-later> (accessed 20 January 2016). Summarising the significance of *Obergefell* (the Supreme Court decision to legalise same-sex marriage in all 50 states), Baker says, "public Christianity in America suffered what might be its greatest defeat in the nation's history", Kindle e-book, loc. 786. We will have more to say about the gay rights debate later in this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Vermon Pierre, "Faithful Presence Needs Prophets", in Hansen, *Revisiting Faithful Presence*, loc. 1177.

<sup>9</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Essay III, ch. 1, "The Challenge of Faithfulness".

<sup>10</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, part II, chapter 6, available online at <http://www.worldinvisible.com/library/chesterton/everlasting/part2c6.htm> (accessed 28 January 2016). The five occasions, according to Chesterton, had to do with the Arian heresy, the Albigensians, Humanist skepticism, Voltaire, and Darwinism.

<sup>11</sup> Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 242.

social systems healed. But now we must do so from a position of cultural disadvantage and relative powerlessness.

The response to this situation from Christians has been a proliferation of discussions about cultural engagement. Everyone agrees that the situation is dire, but they are divided on how best to respond. That is what I wish to sort through here.

I have decided to follow in the proud tradition of Plato and David Hume,<sup>12</sup> thinking through the options in terms of a series of dialogues with imaginary interlocutors. Unlike Plato and Hume, I am a denizen of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and I tend to think cinematically. The dialogues have taken the form of a script for an imaginary film. In the film I will be conversing with three characters who represent the different major options for engagement (or disengagement) with the surrounding mainstream culture: a Knight, a Gardener, and a Member of the Loyal Opposition.

- The Knight is passionate. His *modus operandi* is to charge into the fray and, through political manoeuvring, try to power his way to cultural change. His slogan might be from Shakespeare's *Henry V*: "Once more unto the breach, dear friends!"<sup>13</sup>
- The Gardener is just as passionate, but has a quieter manner about her. Her *modus operandi* is to attempt an indirect route to cultural change. By withdrawing to a place of cultural seclusion, she hopes to re-establish a Christian culture, forming nurturing communities where roots can go down deep into the nourishing soil of ancient Christian traditions of belief and practice. Her slogan might be the last line from Voltaire's *Candide*: "We must cultivate our garden."
- The Member of the Loyal Opposition is a patient, even-tempered sort. His *modus operandi* is to simply be a Christian in a post-Christian world. He seeks neither to flee the mainstream culture, nor large-scale reform. Rather, he remains within mainstream cultural structures practicing "faithful presence". He is content to see incremental, gradual changes where possible. His slogan might be taken from the famous English poster from World War II: "Keep calm and carry on."

Please bear in mind that these characters are purely my inventions, foils whose main purpose is helping me articulate my critiques and sketch out my

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<sup>12</sup> Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 3d ed. revised, translated by Henry Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), *Online Library of Liberty*, available online at <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/166>; and David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 1789, available online at <http://www.davidhume.org/texts/dnr.html> (both works accessed 12 March 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Act III, Scene 1.

own position. Even so, I hope to faithfully present the relevant positions without caricature (which is why the dialogues are heavily footnoted). In other words, none of these characters should be made of straw.

For you visual learners, here is where I would place each character on the spectrum of cultural engagement:

<b>Knight</b>	<b>Member of the Loyal Opposition</b>	<b>Gardener</b>
Mission: transformative – to transform culture so that it might conform to Christ’s righteous rule.	Mission: mediating – to leaven culture with Christian influence maintaining a “faithful presence” within various cultural institutions.	Mission: conservationist – to preserve and deepen Christian tradition.
Outward-facing	←————→	Inward-facing

The dialogues will comprise Part I of this essay. For Part II, I will gather the characters for a roundtable discussion (or better, monologue) to explore what I consider to be an overlooked dimension of the discussion: engaging post-Christian culture through the imagination (especially in the arts and entertainment), or what I call “planting oases”.

### *Scene I: The Knight’s Dialogue*

The scene opens in a tastefully furnished office somewhere in downtown Washington D.C.<sup>14</sup> The Knight sits comfortably behind a big mahogany desk. An oriental rug covers the floor. Pictures of the Knight with various influential members of Congress and framed degrees hang on the wall. Behind the desk sits the Knight, a man in his 50s, greying at the temples, and steel-grey eyes. He is a man of no little intelligence and experience; he knows the ropes in D.C. He is a culture warrior of the Christian Right.<sup>15</sup> In truth you

<sup>14</sup> Here I must beg my British readers’ forgiveness. I am, for better or worse, American. I grew upon a post-Roe v. Wade America, and the Knight is for me and all-too-recognisable character in the States. But I don’t know how to write a British knight. I simply do not possess the sort of familiarity with the textures and key moments of British evangelical political activism. From what my English and Welsh friends tell me, the Knight is a far rarer bird in Britain than in the States. Sympathies tend rather toward withdrawal than tilting at legislative windmills. Please feel free to put the Knight in tweed, and in an office in Westminster somewhere near Parliament.

<sup>15</sup> The Christian Right is a catchall term for theologically and politically conservative cultural activists. Such a perspective is more typical of American Christian political discourse. Many are of the opinion that America was historically a Christian nation that has lately been hijacked by anti-Christian forces. The goal of Christian political involvement, then, is to return the country to its Christian roots. They mobilise over sex and family issues (same-sex marriage, abortion, etc.). An influential example would be author and radio talk-show host Dr. James Dobson (of Focus on the Family), or Republican Presidential hopeful Ted Cruz.

could substitute someone from the Christian Left,<sup>16</sup> the Neo-Kuyperians of the Center for Public Justice,<sup>17</sup> or a Theonomist.<sup>18</sup> For all their differences (and they are profound), these movements converge in terms of their goal and method: they each seek cultural change through primarily (or even solely) political means. This political approach seeks to build a grassroots movement, believing that if only they can get enough ordinary Christians to get involved, change will happen.

But cultural change is more complicated than that, as we shall see.

Turnau: Thanks for seeing me. I can't help but notice, Sir Knight, how thick your armour and how sharp your lance.

Knight: A wise guy, eh? You can clearly see I'm wearing a 3-piece suit.

Turnau: I mean metaphorically. In terms of cultural stance, aggression and so on.

Knight: What of it? I'm on a mission.

Turnau: A quest?

Knight: (*Rolls eyes.*) If you insist.

Turnau: And what is your quest?

Knight: To reclaim this country for Jesus Christ and his reign. We need to turn this country around. This is God's country, but we don't live by his standards. We're going to hell in a handbasket. Or as Solomon put it, "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34). This nation has become an object of reproach. Gay marriage is only the latest piece of evidence that things need to be turned around. Someone has to shore up the tottering foundation, like Ezekiel said: "I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the

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<sup>16</sup> The Christian Left is like the Christian Right except they tend to be less nationalistic, and more liberal, both theologically and politically. The movement coalesced in response to and to counter the Christian Right. The Christian Left mobilises over issues of social justice and environmental policy. An influential example would be Rev. James Wallis, whose books include *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> The Center for Public Justice is an institute that seeks to establish God's justice in a way that includes the various beliefs and practices of all citizens (a position called "principled pluralism"). The CPJ seeks the common good by reframing Christian political commitments in publically accessible and persuasive terms. See James W. Skillen's *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994). See also <http://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/homepage> (accessed 8 February 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Theonomists, or Christian Reconstructionists, want to bring God's rule over culture to bear in the most direct way possible, even making Mosaic legislation into the law of the land (no reframing principled pluralism here!). See for example Greg L. Bahnsen's *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Powder Springs, GA/Nacogdoches, TX: American Vision/Covenant Media Press, 2008).



land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one" (22:30).  
I'm one of those standing in the gap.

Turnau: For this Christian country?

Knight: Yes. You don't sound so convinced of it yourself.

Turnau: Well, I've been living in Europe for almost 17 years, and in that context, really strong nationalism generally doesn't go good places.

Knight: Are you calling me proto-fascist, or something?

Turnau: Nothing so extreme, I assure you. But the fact remains, nationalism as an identity fits Christians ill.

Knight: Why's that? What's wrong with loving your country?

Turnau: Not a thing. Except that Christian love transcends country.

Knight: I don't see the conflict. This is a country founded on Christian principles that has drifted from its roots. I'd love to see spread around the world the kinds of freedoms that we've known (but that are fast disappearing here).

Turnau: No, I totally agree. I love religious liberty. But I think Christians can get confused in their love of country versus love of God.

Knight: How do you mean?

Turnau: Let me tell you a story. When I was a seminary student, I worked for about six years in a Korean church as a youth minister. They were lovely people. They loved God, and they loved their native Korea. While I was there, something strange and wonderful happened: kids started bringing their friends from the neighbourhood or school to our Friday evening meetings. And these kids weren't Korean. A white kid showed up. Then a black kid. Then a mixed race Hispanic /Thai kid showed up. I thought it was great, but some of the old ladies in the church didn't like seeing kids like that in our church. They went and complained to the pastor.

Knight: What did he say?

Turnau: He said (and I'll always be grateful for this), "This is a Christian church first, and a Korean church second." These different kids were to be welcomed, not expelled.

Knight: So what are you trying to say? How does that apply to a Christian's good and proper love of country?

Turnau: I guess I'm trying to say two interconnected things: 1. It's easy for well-meaning Christians to buy into a nation-first type of Christianity that tends to be self-protective and unwelcoming to outsiders, whereas Christianity has always been about welcoming the outsider (at least if Jesus' model is to be followed). 2. Once somebody entrusts his or her life to Christ, the relationship to nation is attenuated. Our first loyalty is to King Jesus. He certainly calls us to be good citizens, to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt. 22:15-22). But he also destroyed the "wall of

hostility” that divides nations and ethnicities, creating a new, unified people in himself (Eph. 2:14-16). “In Christ” is our real country, a home deeper than our homeland. And it holds people from every nation. That’s our first love.

God and country don’t often fit into a neat, seamless package. They didn’t for the early Christians, and they don’t for us. And we get into trouble when we start investing our nation with semi-messianic powers, as if reclaiming the country would make everything all right again. There’s always going to be a tension between God and country, and it’s worth thinking about. Otherwise, we end up demonising our opponents, or excluding people, like those old Korean ladies did. Just like Jesus *didn’t*. Nationalism is potent stuff, and I’m dismayed when I see Christians fall too readily under its sway.

Knight: Just for the sake of argument, let’s pretend I’m not a xenophobe or a racist. Let’s just say that I love my country, but I recognise that my love for God rightfully claims priority. Let’s say for argument’s sake that I still deeply love my country and want to fight for it, to make its laws just, to love the poor, to protect the unborn, to work for the good of all America’s citizens. I’m still going to insist that Christian laws are the best basis on which to do it.

Turnau: That certainly sounds encouraging, if you can do it in a way that respects other beliefs and understands that we are a minority within a democratically plural society. So how goes the fight?

Knight: (*Sighs.*) Not so great, lately. We’ve had a lot of defeats lately, and things are getting dire, especially in terms of our constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom. But I’m sure it’ll turn around. These things have a way of doing that. The pendulum swings both ways, you know. I’m just trusting in God to give us the victory we need to save this culture. Psalm 91:1, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.”

Turnau: Are you sure it’s not a problem of strategy? You’re not rethinking your approach?

Knight: A little, perhaps. After all, we’re not in the heady days of the Moral Majority, so we don’t have the influence we once had. But it’s still my conviction that there are a lot of good Christian people and like-minded conservatives who, if motivated, could help roll back the advances that the so-called progressives have made recently. We just need to stick to what worked: introducing legislation, calling congressmen to account, fighting to get the right people appointed for judicial nominations... that sort of thing.

Turnau: Has this approach *ever* succeeded?

Knight: (*Casts him a sharp glance.*) Absolutely. Look at history. Think of the Reagan Revolution! The Republican Party made overtures to Evangelical leaders like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and Jim Dobson, who in turn mobilised their supporters and helped get Reagan elected in 1980, and then again in 1984. During that time, federal funding for abortions was cut, and that saved who knows how many unborn lives. Family values became front and centre of the national agenda. Love us or hate us, you couldn't ignore us. Those were the days of non-alcoholic wine and roses, my friend.

Turnau: I'd agree that Christians got a lot done. But did it stick? And did we come away unchanged? It seems to me that that alliance with the Republicans changed the character, the flavour of Evangelical commitment over the years.

Knight: What do you mean?

Turnau: (*Beat. Continues cautiously.*) Well, it's always struck me as curious that so many theologically conservative Christians often automatically support conservative political positions, as if the two naturally went together.

Knight: Don't they? We're all about individual moral responsibility, which fits naturally into a pro-entrepreneurial, pro-traditional family agenda.

Turnau: Perhaps, but there are other positions that feel pretty unnatural biblically. Pro-gun Christians? Anti-environmental protection Christians? Anti-immigration (or even anti-refugee) Christians? It feels as if American Evangelicals have drunk Republican Kool-Aid and it's changed their DNA.<sup>19</sup>

Knight: Evangelicals (and the Fundamentalists before them) have always been a fairly culturally conservative bunch. A lot of that has to do with a suspicion of government interference, keeping big government small and out of our lives.

Turnau: True, but consider an even wider historical perspective. Consider the roots of American Evangelicalism in the First and Second Great Awakenings.<sup>20</sup> Spiritual revival produced an amazing array of what we today would call "progressive" social justice and social reform movements, things such as: shortening the workweek, anti-child-labour legislation, rescuing women out of prostitution, stuff like

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, this argument cuts both ways on the political spectrum. Christians who pin their hopes on the political left often find themselves supporting biblically questionable positions such as abortion-on-demand and same-sex marriage. In the quest for political influence, Christians will face compromises, and over time those compromises will begin to feel like home... things we support simply because we do not want to see "the other guys" win.

<sup>20</sup> The first and second Great Awakenings (American religious revivals) occurred in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, and late 18<sup>th</sup> into mid-19<sup>th</sup> century respectively.

that.<sup>21</sup> And a lot of that included government initiatives. Christians haven't always been against governmental involvement.

Knight: But you're leaving part of the story out, aren't you? A lot of those social reforms were lobbied for in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Social Gospel movement, liberal theologians who had no use for evangelism. Those aren't *my* religious predecessors. They are the great-grandfathers of the political liberals of today. Are you saying we should walk in *their* footsteps?

Turnau: Not necessarily. I've got some real concerns about the theological liberalism bound up with the Social Gospel movement. But it just seems odd that people who care so much about sharing the gospel are at the same time so indifferent (or even hostile) to ideas concerning racial justice, or justice for the poor. Once upon a time, it wasn't like that.<sup>22</sup> Concern for evangelism and social justice weren't always seen as mutually exclusive. Of course, not all of that can be laid at the feet of the Republican Party – the polarisation between theological conservatives and the Social Gospel happened way before the 1980s. My point is simply that since the 1980s, Evangelicalism and Republicanism have come to mirror each other in uncomfortable ways. And that points to a larger lesson to be learned...

Knight: Which is?

Turnau: When Christians cosy up to the halls of power, whether liberal or conservative, they will end up looking and acting like their political benefactors. Just like dogs end up looking like their masters.

Knight: (*Deadpan.*) Nice. You just called us dogs.

Turnau: Just a metaphor. Again. But that's not the worst of it.

Knight: Worse than being a dog?

Turnau: Sure. When Christians seek cultural change primarily through power politics, you invite a backlash movement against those changes. Politics is an inherently coercive strategy for changing culture. Even if you gather a majority, your programme of reforms force the minority into the cultural patterns you choose. And that inevitably creates resentment against that coercive majority, and a backlash.

Knight: (*Fixes him with a hard stare.*) Do you have any proof of this?

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<sup>21</sup> See Richard F. Lovelace, "The Spiritual Roots of Christian Social Concern", in *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> The historical record of racial justice issues among biblically-minded Christians has been mixed, to say the least. Highlights would include William Wilberforce's lifelong effort to ban the slave trade in Britain. Lowlights would have to include the quietism concerning slavery of the Puritans during the First Great Awakening, and even slavery-justifying 19<sup>th</sup> century theology from the pens of otherwise orthodox Presbyterian theologians such as Robert Lewis Dabney and James Henley Thornwell.

Turnau: Sure. Look at the rise of the “religious nones” among Millennials. It’s no secret that it’s due in large part because of their resentment and rejection of their parents’ politics.<sup>23</sup> This resentment may also be behind the way young people have been transforming Christianity into “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”, a watered down, more tolerant, “nicer” version of Christianity in which God remains a fuzzy distant being who only wants you to be a better you.<sup>24</sup> Resentment probably also explains the popularity of the New Atheism in the U.S., as well as the rapid rise of a new sexual orthodoxy.<sup>25</sup> We are now reaping the harvest of resentment against the Reagan-Bush years.

Knight: But coercion can’t be helped! That’s the nature of politics. Besides, it’s not as if *we* were the aggressors. The culture shifted away from *us*, and now we’re the ones being coerced! There’s a lot of resentment among conservatives nowadays.

Turnau: I don’t deny that, when given the chance, liberals have used political muscle to shift culture and policy in directions they desired. Predictably, their recent successes have created resentment among conservatives.<sup>26</sup> The difference is that social liberals have *also* invested in elite universities, mainstream media and entertainment companies – the core cultural institutions that shape the collective imagination (what I call the “imaginary landscape”) – in a way that conservatives did not.<sup>27</sup> That makes a huge difference, because it sets the stage for a long-term cultural change. The grassroots

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<sup>23</sup> The increase started in the 1990s, soon after the Reagan Revolution and during the Presidency of George W. Bush. Harvard Professor of Public Policy Robert Putnam attributes the rise to political disaffection: “These were the kids who were coming of age in the America of the culture wars, in the America in which religion publicly became associated with a particular brand of politics...” Quoted in Heidi Glenn, “Losing Our Religion: The Growth of the ‘Nones’”, *National Public Radio* website, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/01/11/169164840/losing-our-religion-the-growth-of-the-nones?ft=1&f=1014&sc=tw> (accessed 14 January 2013).

<sup>24</sup> See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> For those wishing to understand the new sexual-moral orthodoxy, a good place to start is Alastair Roberts’ “Five Principles of the New Sexual Morality”, *The Gospel Coalition* website, 15 August 2014, available online at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-principles-of-the-new-sexual-morality/> (accessed 17 September 2014).

<sup>26</sup> This resentment may help us understand the rise of Donald Trump within the Republican Party.

<sup>27</sup> It is true that Christians also invested into institutions, but they were mostly subcultural investments that made little impact on mainstream culture. And even then, the amount of giving to specifically cultural initiatives (leadership, innovation, the arts) was dwarfed by the amount given to similar initiatives by secular foundations. For a comparison of secular versus evangelical cultural investment, see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Essay I, chapter 6, “The Cultural Economy of American Christianity”, esp. 81-84.

revolution of the 1980s never swayed those at the centres of cultural power, so the changes it brought about soon faded. Its real legacy is the resentment it engendered among those élites who truly shape the culture.<sup>28</sup>

Knight: (*Pounds desk, startling Turnau.*) But we have to do something! We need to be involved in our culture. Think of the world we're leaving our kids. We can't just let it all go to hell!

Turnau: (*Collects himself. Placating, but sincere.*) Look, I admire your passion and conviction, the way you call people to be intentionally engaged in culture. I truly do. You look at the world and want it to be better, and you're throwing yourself into the fray. There's no quit in you, that's for sure. However, maybe we ought to step back and draw some lessons from history. The failure of the Reagan legacy is only the last chapter in a saga that has been going on for centuries.

Knight: (*Begrudgingly.*) I'm not sure I am willing to admit that the Reagan years were in vain, but what is this historical "saga" you're talking about?

Turnau: I'm saying that you can see a similar pattern elsewhere. The Great Awakening took place in New England, and now it's one of the regions of America most resistant to the gospel. Look at the Netherlands. The Christian influence there reached its height in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when the brilliant theologian/educator/statesman Abraham Kuyper became Prime Minister. But where is the Christian influence now? Holland has some of the most liberal narcotics laws in the world. England was once considered a Christian nation, but it too experienced a gradual, but serious, erosion of the faith after World War II that continues to this day. In fact, the erosion of the Christian faith institutionally and in the hearts and minds of the people has been the story of the last few centuries in the West generally.

Knight: But why? In each case, they were doing the best they could. Each of these countries was founded on Christian principles. Why shouldn't they try to move them back in line with those principles, even using politics to do it?

Turnau: (*Takes a deep breath and settles into "teacher mode".*) The problem lies in the nature of political power itself and its effect on the collective imagination, especially when the church is involved. Whenever the church gets too close to the political powers that be, it is always the church that gets burned in the long run. At least that's

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<sup>28</sup> Sociologist James Davison Hunter has argued persuasively that cultural change emanates from the centres of cultural power, the élites, rather than from grassroots movements. See *To Change the World*, Essay I, chapter 4, "An Alternative View of Cultural Change in Eleven Propositions".

the lesson I draw from sociologist David Martin and his study of the different patterns of secularisation.<sup>29</sup> Secularisation took different routes in the West according to the various patterns of church-state relationships. Where church and state were highly integrated so that the church was a virtual tool for state policy (for example, in Catholic countries such as France in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries), the reaction was eventually a violent anti-clericalism: “Strangle the last king with the entrails of the last priest!” Where church and state ties were looser, but still substantial (for example, in the state supported Protestant churches of Britain and Northern Europe) secularisation was experienced as a gradual decline of social legitimacy. The church lives on, but comes to be seen as more and more socially irrelevant. And in America, where there was a separation of church and state, and the various denominations were left to fend for themselves on the model of an open marketplace (as in the United States), religion fared rather better. Secularisation arrived rather later, and took hold mostly among the cultured élites. So the more the church got intertwined with state power, the more pronounced was the secularisation that followed. And you could tack on the Reagan and Bush years, and the secularist backlash that followed, as an example of more of the same.

Knight: So you're saying the drift to secularisation was inevitable *and* our fault?

Turnau: No, of course not. The causes of secularisation are varied and complicated. But there is a lesson to be learned from the story Martin tells.

Knight: (*Patently, knowing that Turnau won't stop until his punch line.*) Which is?

Turnau: That the health of religion in the long-term is inversely proportional to the amount of integration between state and church. More integration and state support for the church in the long term produces, paradoxically, a weaker, more socially marginalised church.

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<sup>29</sup> David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularisation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978). Martin has amended and nuanced his theory over the years, especially given the historical realities of the fall of Communism and the resurgence of radical religion in the 1980s. See for example his later *On Secularisation: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate, 2005). A helpful summary can be found in his article “What I Really Said about Secularisation”, *Dialogue* 46, 2 (Summer 2007): 139-52. Still, his insights about the link between religion and politics and their contribution to secularisation remain valid, and have inspired other authors. See for example David Lyon, *The Steeple's Shadow: On the Myths and Realities of Secularization* (London/Grand Rapids: SPCK/Eerdmans, 1985) and José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Knight: (*Blinks.*) That doesn't make sense. Why would *more* political influence *weaken* the church's political influence later on?

Turnau: Because that short-term cultural influence doesn't come for free. It must be paid for in the loss of long-term social legitimacy. The church cannot be seen as a friend to the powerless when it dwells habitually in the halls of power. So it loses the right to speak prophetically to power on behalf of the powerless.

And here is the corollary that is pertinent for us: Wherever Christians have sought to impose their will on society through political coercion, even in subtle ways, they always end up paying for it in the currency of the loss of respect of the next generation. The picture of a politically powerful church is etched with resentment in the collective imagination of its children. This has been the story of the rapid or gradual decline of Christian fervour in Europe, and more recently, in North America as well. When a Christian faith-inspired social order is politically imposed on a society, it simply inoculates the next generation against the Christian faith. And that inoculation is difficult to overcome.

Knight: (*Shifts uncomfortably in his upholstered desk chair, ready to change the subject.*) Nevertheless, we can and must present arguments that should carry the day. OK, so maybe the day of Christian America and appealing to the Bible has passed. But God has implanted a solid sense of natural law in people (Rom. 2:14-15), so that they know what is right. We can make our case based on that, even in as thoroughly a secular society as ours is becoming. We just need to communicate our points more elegantly, more powerfully, and eventually, truth shall prevail.

Turnau: (*Eyes narrow.*) I'm not so sure it is that straightforward. Culture is, among other things, an interpretive project. It's a way of collectively understanding the world around us. And as our culture fragments and drifts in a more inoculated, disenchanting, post-Christian direction, the way we interpret things like "natural" or "marriage" or "family" or "human rights" or "freedom" or "justice" are going to become more and more fragmented and post-Christian too. Surely you've felt that in the debates you've been involved with.

Knight: Well, yeah, but I'm not convinced we should give up on natural law. There are some things that are simply part of the natural created order.

Turnau: (*Leans forward.*) Yes, but to be a persuasive part of the debate, those things must be *understood* as natural and right. We assume that "natural" means "neutral", but it doesn't. "Nature" for Christians is always *God's* nature, interpreted according to his standards (that is, biblically). If the people we are debating (and our audience) don't



accept God's lordship over nature, and his authority over natural standards, they are unlikely to accept biblical standards of what counts as natural. Isn't that what Romans 1:18-25 is all about: suppressing the knowledge of God? Natural law *isn't* self-evident to fallen people who compulsively distort nature's revelation about God and all reality.<sup>30</sup> Bottom line: members of both sides of cultural debates no longer agree upon definitions that we used to. These definitions ("natural", "marriage" and so on) are embedded in specific traditions and have meaning only within those traditions.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the collective imagination is the cradle of "natural". If your interlocutor's imaginary landscape is no longer recognisably Christian, appealing to natural law is simply a way of talking past each other.

**Knigh:** So what are you saying? If we give up on natural law dialogue, what's left? Admit we no longer speak a shared language, so we should just withdraw from politics and admit defeat?

**Turnau:** Not exactly, but I am suggesting that culture-war-politics-as-usual isn't working. We need to reassess our position, and widen our approach. Christians (especially strongly nationalistic Christians) have often seen themselves as Conquistadors who are interested in reclaiming the land, bringing the country to heel (and not to heal).<sup>32</sup> We get territorial and pugnacious. We come off as bullies. Perhaps we need to stop thinking of ourselves as a moral majority and understand our role as what Russell Moore calls the "prophetic minority".<sup>33</sup> There is a better way than bullying and trying to reconquer a mythically once-Christian land.<sup>34</sup> A better option would be to speak about what's important to us, ground our messages in Scripture, and seek to be part of the broader cultural conversation

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<sup>30</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1999), cited in James K. A. Smith, "Beyond 'Creation' and Natural Law: An Evangelical Public Theology", *Comment* 26 March, 2015, available online at <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/4432/beyond-creation-and-natural-law-an-evangelical-public-theology/> (accessed 9 February 2016).

<sup>31</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> I acknowledge that the pun only comes across in written form. If this film ever were made, you'd have to turn on the subtitles to catch it.

<sup>33</sup> See his excellent and nuanced book on cultural engagement, *Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Though some of the Founders were Christian, many (Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin being the most famous) were also Deists hostile to Christian orthodoxy. Further, America's "Christian" past is rife with injustices such as slavery, Jim Crow, laws that favoured robber baron industrialists, genocide and forced relocation of Native Americans. America's past is only very, very imperfectly Christian.

for the good of all (after all, we have the gospel-wisdom of God to share).

Knight: As if anyone will listen to us without some kind of political leverage...

Turnau: They might, if we demonstrate our goodwill in compassionate and creative ways. But relying on politics alone is a non-starter.

Knight: Why so? It's the way things get done. Politics is the most expedient way to bring change.

Turnau: Most direct, maybe. Most viscerally satisfying, for sure. But, as I said, it's not the most successful way to bring long-term cultural change. When you rely on politics alone, you overlook something important: the context within which politics takes place.

Knight: Which is?

Turnau: The cultural imagination. Politics alone never really impacts the imaginary landscape upon which politics rests, in which political action is rooted. Gregory Wolfe, editor of *Image* (a Christian arts journal), put it this way:

But the urgent need at the moment is to recognize that we cannot reduce culture and its various modes of discourse to nothing more than a political battleground. The political institutions of a society grow up out of a rich cultural life, and not the other way around. As its etymology indicates, the word culture is a metaphor for organic growth. Reducing culture to politics is like constantly spraying insecticide and never watering or fertilizing the soil.<sup>35</sup>

It feels very much as if Christians need to shift their focus to prepping the soil, that imaginary landscape that allows or resists political change.

Knight: Well, that sounds like what an art journal editor *would* say. But that's not where the action is. That's not how you change things.

Turnau: But unless you do that patient cultural work, if all you do is focus on politics, you end up making the Christian faith look like just another political interest group. Except that this one wants to control everyone else's private lives. Non-Christians look at Christians and they see us as aggressive, coercive, and uninterested in the common

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<sup>35</sup> Gregory Wolfe, "Why I Am a Conscientious Objector in the Culture Wars", in *Intruding upon the Timeless: Meditations on Art, Faith, and Mystery* (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2003). More recently, artist Makoto Fujimura has written about the need to shift from a "culture war" perspective (culture as a battleground, a struggle over cultural direction and meanings) to a "culture care" perspective (where we collectively and generously create beauty for the common good). Fujimura's project aims at changing the metaphor for understanding culture "from a territory that is to be fought over to a garden that is to be nurtured". See his *Culture Care: Reconnecting with Beauty for our Common Life*, 2d. ed. (New York: Fujimura Institute/International Arts Movement, 2015), cited in Julie Silander, "From Culture Wars to Culture Care", *Story Warren*, 29 June, 2015, available online at <http://www.storywarren.com/culture-war-or-culture-care/> (accessed 12 March 2016).

good.<sup>36</sup> Because Christians have ignored the resentment they themselves have created, we are now largely seen as Grinches, more defined by what we are against than what we are for. Maybe it is time for Christian culture warriors to tone it down somewhat.

**Knight:** (*Incredulous.*) Tone it down? Do you even realise what's going on? Christians are being persecuted as our freedoms are being undermined, even the freedom of speech. The rights of Christians are being trampled underfoot. What you're suggesting sounds defeatist and disastrous. You're saying we should abandon politics and just let the culture drift where it may, without struggle, without contest.

**Turnau:** I'm not suggesting that we just give up and give in. We are still called as witnesses, a prophetic voice. But we do need to adapt to our current situation. We're no longer a moral majority. We are now on the margins looking in, as the cultural logic of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (however you choose to define it)" plays itself out. We need to realise that we're in a post-Christian society. Christians have become missionaries to our own cultures, and it is time for us to give up on dreams of empire. Instead, we need to work for the common good and loving our neighbour. And we need to prepare ourselves mentally, emotionally, and spiritually for some harassment (not persecution – I'd reserve that word for places where Christians really are under attack, like Syria).

Understanding our current situation means modifying our tone to be more winsome than aggressive. We need people to understand that we're not seeking to enslave them or spoil the fun. Rather, we're trying to heal brokenness and bring light for the common good. As it is, Sir Knight, not a lot of non-Christians would consider Christians to be a gentle people, but that's what we need to be. It's what we've *always* needed to be. And thankfully, there are already some public representatives of the faith who are measured, nuanced, and gentle in their tone (Tim Keller and Russell Moore come immediately to mind).

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<sup>36</sup> This deep distrust of the Christian Right manifests itself in the blogosphere such as *Religious Right Watch* (<http://www.religiousrightwatch.com/>) and *People for the American Way's Right Wing Watch* (<http://www.rightwingwatch.org/>) as well as in the success of popular books with titles like *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2006). The author, Chris Hedges, is a journalist for the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and the *Christian Science Monitor* who has taught at elite institutions such as Columbia, Princeton, and New York University. Another example, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday, 2016), written by *New Yorker* staff writer and best-selling author, Jane Mayer. In other words, these critiques are being made at the centres of cultural influence.

Knight: But politics is a rough-and-tumble sport, not for sissies. You give an inch, they'll walk on you for a mile.

Turnau: Nevertheless, we need to conduct ourselves politically in such a way that our opponents understand that we love them. I mean, if Jesus commanded us to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43-48), doesn't that apply to politics as well? But that's not the tone I hear coming from many Christian culture warriors. We need to love and work for the good of those we consider our opponents. And it is going to take great patience on our part.

Knight: OK, so we should love those across the aisle from us. Is that going to get it done? Will that bring the victory we seek?

Turnau: Well, it depends on how you define victory. If you see victory in terms of a zero-sum game where we win and they lose, then probably not. But if you see victory in terms of prophetic witness for the common good as the truth is spoken in love, then yes (though I'm sure not all prophets – like Jeremiah – feel like victors at the time; it may be prophetic witness through tears). But that's the kind of politics we need to strive for: loving, truthful witness rather than dominion over our enemies.

Knight: (*Shrugs and shakes head.*) I don't know. That just sounds so incredibly naïve. Politics doesn't work like that. And it still sounds defeatist, like lowering the bar and saying, "Well, just get your message across."

Turnau: (*Hands outstretched.*) From our current position within post-Christian culture, I'm not sure that anything more is possible, or even desirable. But when I'm talking about witness, I'm not just talking about political witness, though that's a part of it. If we want to be salt and light in this culture, we need to diversify our efforts. Political debate done in a loving way is an important part of Christian cultural witness, but only part. Though it's often the most visible part, it is perhaps not the most important. We have neglected our broader cultural witness in favour of the solely political. For us, public witness has become reduced to politics.<sup>37</sup> In the meantime we have neglected the imaginary landscape, letting it develop in ways that are inimical to a Christian social order, and even some Christian virtues.<sup>38</sup> No amount of culture warring will fix that. It's like tilting at windmills.

Look, I am definitely not saying "Give up on politics". Democracy grants us a political voice, at least thus far, and we should use it. But

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<sup>37</sup> Hunter, Essay II, "Rethinking Power", esp. pp. 103, 169.

<sup>38</sup> Even post-Christian cultures treasure virtues such as forgiveness and mercy, but it is harder to be pious, chaste, or truly loving (because love sometimes compels us to say things that make others uncomfortable).

I would insist that it is time to adjust our politics to the reality that we are a minority and we cannot simply push our agendas through. And even if we could, given the amount of resentment we've generated, is it a good idea? Perhaps it is time to restrict ourselves to a political language that cultivates civility, compassion, and the common good, rather than a political language that resonates with themes of dominion and conquering the land. And it is high time to tend to the slow, careful work of tending the imaginary landscape rather than taking political shortcuts.

Knight: (*Ruminating, reflecting.*) Well, I'm not ready to give up the battle just yet, but it's worth thinking about.

Turnau: While you're thinking about it, let me sum up my critiques.

(*Turns to camera.*) While there is much to admire in the Knight's quest – its intentionality and passion, for instance – there are some deep problems in relying on politics alone to bring change in culture:

- It can inspire a nationalism that confuses our loyalties to God with loyalty to country.
- Christians can compromise to retain political influence, which subtly changes the character of the faith (just as dogs grow to resemble their masters).
- Politics is inescapably coercive. If you force new cultural patterns upon the unwilling, there will inevitably be a backlash. The church ends up paying for its short-term influence in the currency of long-term loss of social legitimacy. We end up inoculating the next generation against the gospel.
- Natural law doesn't provide the neutral ground for debate we hope for. Terms like "natural", "family," and "human rights" become redefined against the backdrop of a new imaginary landscape.
- We must come to grips with our current cultural position and serve as loving prophetic witnesses who speak truth to power, as well as do the patient cultural work that provides the necessary context for political engagement.

Knight: Stop breaking the fourth wall, weirdo.

### *Scene II: The Gardener's Dialogue*

The scene opens on a bright spring day in the walled garden of a monastery. Dark clouds loom on the horizon. The Gardener is a genteel woman in her 60s with a kindly face, perhaps from the Cotswolds or Swansea. She is

dressed in work clothes, tending to her plants while Turnau sits on a stone bench about three feet away. She is a member of the Benedict Option.<sup>39</sup> But truly, she could be a stand-in for garden variety (pun intended) Pietism,<sup>40</sup> neo-Anabaptism,<sup>41</sup> or the New Monasticism.<sup>42</sup> Despite their differences (less profound than with the Knight), these movements share a goal and method: withdraw from mainstream culture so that they can form strong and distinctive spiritual communities that will preserve Christian belief and practice. These communities will serve as incubators, a positive model for others in the world. In other words, the world will change (perhaps) when the church succeeds at being truly and deeply the church.<sup>43</sup> Christian cultural influence happens (if at all) primarily through setting a good example by

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<sup>39</sup> The term was coined by *American Conservative* editor Rod Dreher. For a good introduction to the Benedict Option, see Rod Dreher, "Benedict Option as a Way of Life", *American Conservative*, 27 September 2015, available online at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/benedict-option-way-of-life/> and "Benedict Option FAQ", *American Conservative*, 6 October 2015, available online at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/benedict-option-faq/>. The Benedict Option has become a popular minority opinion regarding cultural engagement in the U.S. after the Supreme Court's same-sex marriage ruling, *Obergefell vs. Hodges*, in 2014. A recent survey revealed that 37% of those polled believed it was "very important" to form stronger links with others who share our religious beliefs rather than to work for social change. See Dreher, "Shocking Numbers for the Benedict Option", available online at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/shocking-numbers-benedict-option-poll-37-percent/>. The Benedict Option has its fair share of critics, and Dreher has responded to them here: "Critics of the Benedict Option", *American Conservative*, 8 July 2015, available online at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/critics-of-the-benedict-option/> (all 4 articles accessed 1 February 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Pietism has its roots in German Lutheranism of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but as a cultural attitude it has spread far and wide. In general, Pietism sees Christian faithfulness largely in terms of a mild isolation from surrounding culture. Too much connection with the surrounding culture is perceived to undermine personal holiness. Rather, Pietism seeks to emphasise the "spiritual" (Bible study, prayer, devotional life, etc.) as opposed to the cultural.

<sup>41</sup> James Davison Hunter gives a good overview of this approach in Essay II, chapter 5, "The Neo-Anabaptists", in *To Change the World*. See also Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> On the New Monasticism, see James K. A. Smith in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 209-11.

<sup>43</sup> The much-discussed Reformed or Radical Two Kingdoms Theology (R2K) would *not* be part of the Gardener's group. R2K theologians share an interest in the church, but they do not believe that influencing the surrounding culture should be of interest to the ordinary Christian. They assume such a radical discontinuity between the old and new creations that nothing in current culture is much worth saving or reforming. For a good overview to Radical Two Kingdom theology, see David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), as well as Keith Mathison's insightful review of it in "2K or Not 2K? That is the Question: A Review of David VanDrunen's *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*", Ligonier Ministries website, 9 December 2010, available online at <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/2k-or-not-2k-question-review-david-vandruncens-living-gods-two-kingdoms/> - edn16 (accessed 1 February 2016). See also David T. Koyzis, "Two Kingdoms and Cultural Obedience", *Comment* website, 1 March 2010, available online at <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/2020/two-kingdoms-and-cultural-obedience/> (accessed 1 February 2016).

living a decent, moral life inculcated through intentional Christian community, and through personal evangelism.

But can cultural change transpire through a strategy of withdrawal from culture? We shall see.

Turnau: Nice crop of catechumens you have there.

Gardener: (*Not looking up.*) They're dahlias.

Turnau: Oh. Well, (*sings*) "Hello, dahlia!"

Gardener: (*Irritated, but still not looking up.*) Is there something I can help you with?

Turnau: Yeah. I'm wondering what you're doing in here, while the Knight and others are hard at work jousting with opponents... in Christian love.

Gardener: (*Looks up for the first time and fixes him with a hard stare.*) You don't understand, do you? The battle's over and the enemy has taken the field. It is now time for a strategic withdrawal.<sup>44</sup> It is time to regroup. The barbarians are at the gate. Time to do as St. Benedict did when Rome became utterly corrupted: go out to the forest, pray, build communities and preserve what we have got left in the hope that someday things will turn around.<sup>45</sup> For now, we need to do what we can to preserve Christian culture to pass it on to the next generation. We lose hope of any good influence on a culture like this if we lose our Christian distinctiveness. "If salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything

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<sup>44</sup> See Rod Dreher, "The Accidental Benedict Option", *The American Conservative*, 19 April 2015, available online at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/accidental-benedict-option/> (accessed 13 February 2016). Dreher defines the Benedict Option (and the nature of strategic withdrawal) this way:

What I call the Benedict Option is this: a limited, strategic withdrawal of Christians from the mainstream of American popular culture, for the sake of shoring up our understanding of what the church is, and what we must do to be the church. We must do this because the strongly anti-Christian nature of contemporary popular culture occludes the meaning of the Gospel, and hides from us the kinds of habits and practices we need to engage in to be truly faithful to what we have been given. As Jonathan Wilson has pointed out about the New Monasticism movement (a form of the Benedict Option), the church must do this not to hide away as a pure remnant — the church would be unfaithful to Christ if it did so — but to *strengthen* itself to be the church for the world.

The extent of this withdrawal is often debated between supporters and critics of the Benedict Option. Dreher has repeatedly denied that he seeks to be isolationist (see for example "Critics"). But months later, Dreher will write something that sounds blatantly isolationist, such as his piece entitled "Head for Higher Ground" in the *American Conservative* (21 January 2016, available online at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/head-for-higher-ground/>) that ends with the line "If you aren't going to head for higher ground, whatever that might mean, then you and your Christian neighbours had better start building an ark. Don't panic. *Prepare.*" Suffice it to say that Dreher calls for withdrawal of some significant sort from the structures and works of mainstream culture.

<sup>45</sup> See Dreher, "FAQ".

except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (Matt. 5:13). We're fast becoming something good only for stepping on.

Turnau: How do you know? What led you to this depressing conclusion?

Gardener: Well, look around you. As you say, the culture (especially popular culture) is clearly post-Christian, antagonistic to Christian concerns. And just look at the effect it's had. Just look at this next generation of so-called Christians.

Turnau: What about them?

Gardener: They've lost their flavour. They've transformed traditional Christianity into that bland, inoffensive, tasteless *mélange* that sociologist Christian Smith calls "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism". It's naught but a feel-good religion of niceness designed to affirm the self.<sup>46</sup>

Turnau: Yeah, I was talking about MTD with the Knight. Know him?

Gardener: Good-hearted fellow. I can't take the way he wraps the cross in the flag, though. I'm better off in here, away from that ruckus.

Turnau: Well, you're not going to get an argument from me about conflating the gospel and nationalism. And I don't think you're wrong about the kinds of Christians too many churches produce: bland, ineffectual, about an inch deep in their Christian life and knowledge. What's your solution?

Gardener: (*Intensely.*) Intentional communities; places where families and friends can disconnect from the surrounding culture and deepen their faith roots through better teaching and relearning age-old Christian habits and practices. We need places where we can start retraining our passions and imaginations to pursue God and holiness like we should. You know: Christian spiritual disciplines and the like.

Turnau: (*Cautious, probing.*) And *must* we disconnect from the surrounding culture to do that?

Gardener: Certainly, at least in part. The very structures of modernity are like acid to the faith, or aphids on the roses. It weakens it, fades it, sucks the life right out of it, and renders faith mute, a trivial private concern of the heart that has no impact on public life.<sup>47</sup> The ordinary Christian has no choice but to buckle under to that cultural pressure, or withdraw and regroup. We need to build ourselves "plausibility

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<sup>46</sup> See Smith and Lundquist.

<sup>47</sup> For an entertaining and informative primer on how modern life drives religion towards privatisation, see Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), especially chapters (or "memoranda") 3 through 5. Guinness, a student of sociologist of religion Peter Berger, imaginatively unpacks many of Berger's insights regarding modernity's subversion of religious faith.



structures”, places where being and living like a Christian makes sense.<sup>48</sup> This culture is not that place.

Turnau: What about outreach? What about the church’s mission to reach the lost?

Gardener: (*Patiently; she’s heard this objection before.*) Well, we’re not going to up and abandon evangelism.<sup>49</sup> But do consider: what is evangelism, really? Is it just passing on a few words? Or is it an introduction to a spiritual relationship with God, a way of life, an ongoing pursuit of holiness? By living in intentional communities the way Christians are supposed to live, by deepening our roots, by telling the real story of our faith to ourselves *first*, we are able to reach out to others better. In the words of church historian Robert Louis Wilken (*reads from a magazine lying in the flowerbed*):

Nothing is more needful today than the survival of Christian culture, because in recent generations this culture has become dangerously thin. At this moment in the Church’s history in this country (and in the West more generally) it is less urgent to convince the alternative culture in which we live of the truth of Christ than it is for the Church to tell itself its own story and to nurture its own life, the culture of the city of God, the Christian republic. This is not going to happen without a rebirth of moral and spiritual discipline and a resolute effort on the part of Christians to comprehend and to defend the remnants of Christian culture.<sup>50</sup>

That’s why I think when we talk in church about “missions”, we need to focus first on the *real* mission of the church. In the words of Rod Dreher, “[The Benedict Option] needs to be mission-minded, and that mission has to be the search for holiness, which is to say, to find unity with God. All the evangelizing and good works done by the congregations must be subordinate to the prime love, which is of God.”<sup>51</sup>

Turnau: (*Pauses a moment, considering.*) What you say makes a lot of sense, but I’m not convinced that cutting ourselves off from the culture is the way to go. Am I allowed to agree and disagree at the same time?

Gardener: Do continue.

Turnau: Okay, so for one thing, I too am pretty disappointed with the thinness of Christian knowledge and commitment I see nowadays. I think Christian Smith is right on the money with the MTD thing. And

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<sup>48</sup> See Peter Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), esp. chapter 2, “Religion and World Maintenance”.

<sup>49</sup> See Dreher, “FAQ,” especially the sections “Isn’t this a violation of the Great Commission”, and “Update 12/28”.

<sup>50</sup> See Dreher, “Critics.” The quote comes from Robert Louis Wilken, “The Church as Culture”, *First Things*, April 2004, available online at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2004/04/the-church-as-culture> (accessed 1 February 2016).

<sup>51</sup> Dreher, “Accidental”.

it's not just teens, but adults, too. And who's to blame? Parents, maybe. Churches, certainly. Too many do a pretty poor job teaching their people in depth, teaching them how to live the faith out in everyday life and in their communities, teaching parents how to catechise their kids, how to pray together, that sort of stuff. So as it is, there's very little resistance to the drift of the culture overall. You're absolutely right about that.

Gardener: (*Waiting for the other shoe to drop.*) But you don't think withdrawal is the answer because... you think popular culture's not to blame?

Turnau: No, no. I think popular culture often functions as a sort of combo-package secular/pagan catechesis and sentimental education that helps us feel what life is like in a world where God is dead or irrelevant.

Gardener: (*Eyebrows raised.*) Oh, so you agree with me, then?

Turnau: Not exactly. For one thing, I don't think that's *all* popular culture is. It's certainly a parade of false idols, but it's also a parade of common grace. *And* because popular culture makes up multiple worlds of meaning in which our non-Christian friends live, breathe, want, hope, we ought to understand it. If we want to reach them, we need to familiarise ourselves with the works that open up vistas for them, worlds of meaning that shape their imaginations. We need to learn to speak the language of these worlds.<sup>52</sup>

Gardener: But only at the cost of spiritual compromise, correct? Only at the risk of undermining our own faith, and the faith of our children.

Turnau: Really? See, here's where I disagree with you. I'm not convinced Christians have to choose between intentional community and engagement with the culture (especially arts and entertainment) around us. In fact, done right, engagement with culture can bring out God's glory more fully because we learn to see common grace in culture for what it is: God's glory shining through his gifts to us. And we learn to see our culture's idols for what they are: systemic distortions of God's blessings, twisted gospels. And when the gospel is contrasted with the darkness and distortion of non-Christian counterfeits, it helps us see the real thing in bright relief, like a portrait of grace in chiaroscuro.<sup>53</sup>

Gardener: Now *I'm* the one who's not convinced. It sounds like you're playing word games. It sounds like a convoluted distortion of worship. And I

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<sup>52</sup> On popular cultural works and how they project worlds of meaning, see Turnau, *Popologetics*, and Turnau, "Popular Cultural 'Worlds' as Alternative Religions", *Christian Scholars Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 323-45.

<sup>53</sup> Chiaroscuro is a drawing technique where the artist uses light and shadow to bring out the figure more dramatically.

think it will result in a generation mollified and transfixed by shiny false gods, their eyes drawn away from the true God.

Turnau: Not at all. Informed, critical engagement with non-Christian culture helps us see God's glory more clearly.<sup>54</sup> As we see excellence, beauty and goodness in non-Christian culture (and it *does* exist), we have occasion to thank God who sheds his gifts abroad (Jas. 1:17). As we see the deceptive evil of the idols it promotes, the gospel shines by comparison. This way of seeing all of life – even stuff made in rebellion against God – is utterly biblical. Consider Isaiah's idol polemic in chapter 44:9-20 (and, really, throughout chapters 40-48). Isaiah underscores God's wisdom and power by mocking idols, showing how weird it is to bow down to a carved image made from the same piece of wood you used to cook bread an hour earlier. Consider Ezekiel's lament for Tyre in chapter 27, how he lists and laments all of the good that will be lost with Tyre's fall... because these things *are* good, and it *is* a loss. There's goodness to be mourned, but also he calls out the idols by showing how Tyre's idolatrous worship (of those very goods, among other things) has brought about the city's inevitable downfall. Consider Paul's drawing on truths *and* errors found in Greco-Roman culture in his speech in Athens in Acts 17. He's not just practising good communication; he's drawing on the insights of the non-Christian culture around him.

Gardener: But who actually does this? Most Christians I know who still consume that stuff just sit there and watch, oblivious.

Turnau: You're right. The key is not to consume mindlessly, but rather to consume critically, reflectively, submitting every insight and delight to God. Such reflection is what separates idol worship from the worship of the living God. As Isaiah says in 44:19: "no one stops to think".<sup>55</sup> Cultural engagement is precisely a call to "stop and think" about the culture around us. It is the practice of Christian obedience in cultural consumption (and, as we shall see, cultural creation). Done correctly, it should lead us into deeper worship.

Gardener: Still sounds suspiciously like a rationalisation to me.

Turnau: Not a rationalisation: cultural apologetics, and gratitude for the cultural gifts God has given us that help us enjoy him better.<sup>56</sup> I've

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<sup>54</sup> See Ted Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), ch. 4 (esp. 74-76), and 313-15.

<sup>55</sup> See Dan Strange, "Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology," *Themelios* 36.2 (2011): 258, available online at [http://tgc-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/journal-issues/36.2/Themelios\\_36.2.pdf#page=61](http://tgc-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/journal-issues/36.2/Themelios_36.2.pdf#page=61) (accessed 4 February 2016).

<sup>56</sup> See Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015). Rigney does seem reticent to classify popular culture as one of those gifts, however.

written about an apologetical approach to popular culture, and I find it quite liberating.<sup>57</sup> It's been my experience that watching/listening /playing in the fields of popular culture with my kids gave us plenty of opportunities to talk about what's true and right and good.<sup>58</sup>

Gardener: But doesn't such exposure change you and your children subconsciously? Isn't it a type of spiritual deformation of which you are unaware? Isn't it a kind of worship that form desires that run counter to what God desires?<sup>59</sup> Is critical reflection really enough?

Turnau: No, I concede that by itself, it's not. Our imaginations and desires need to be reformed in true, intentional Christian worship. But that doesn't mean withdrawal is the answer.

Look, I think you're fundamentally right. The church needs to tell its own story, and tell it well. And I agree: living out the Christian story in our marriages, families and friendships can have a profound impact on non-Christian friends.<sup>60</sup> But sometimes that story is told best when confronted with alternative stories, in contrast to those stories. We need to train Christians how to do that. Most churches do a really lousy job teaching their people how to engage culture in a way that is critical, nuanced, and insightful. If they do anything, they teach them how to hate non-Christian culture (*especially* popular culture) as the enemy, and that just succeeds at putting up a wall between us and the people we're trying to reach.

Gardener: (*Shakes her head.*) But it's a question of priorities. Evangelicals are so keen on being missional that they forget that the *main* mission needs to be our *own* pursuit of God, holiness, and right worship.

Turnau: Is it? Don't misunderstand: I'm absolutely for discipleship, pursuing a deeper walk with God, pursuing holiness. But does the Bible *ever* present our pursuit of God and outreach to others as competitors, or that one needs to be subordinated to the other?

Gardener: (*Eyes narrowed.*) What do you mean? The Bible is clear: we must pursue holiness first. David says in Psalm 24:3, "Who can ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has cleans hands and a pure heart." The author of Hebrews says in

<sup>57</sup> See Turnau, *Popologetics*, esp. chs. 10 and 11.

<sup>58</sup> See Ted Turnau, E. Stephen Burnett and Jared Moore, *Engage: Gospel-Centered Parenting in a Popular Cultural World*, forthcoming.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), especially part I, "Desiring, Imaginative Animals: We Are What We Love".

<sup>60</sup> For some beautiful examples of this with regard to the issue of same-sex marriage (from a Catholic perspective), see Wesley Hill, "Thoughts on the 'Benedict Option' and the Dazzled Pagan Eye", *Spiritual Friendships: Musings on God, Sexuality, and Relationships*, 27 June 2015, available online at <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2015/06/27/the-benedict-option-and-the-dazzled-pagan-eye/> (accessed 15 February 2016).

12:14, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness *without which no one will see the Lord.*” Peter says the same in 1 Peter 1:15-16: “But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” Holiness is the *sine qua non* for the Christian. God accepts no one without it.

Turnau: Absolutely. But where does that holiness come from? The Bible talks about us pursuing holiness, but it *also* talks about our holiness as something *we already possess in Christ*. In 1 Corinthians 6:11, Paul talks about the church as those who have *already* been “washed, sanctified [made holy] and justified” in Christ by the Spirit of God. Ephesians 5:25 talks about Christ who has already sanctified his church through the washing of the word. Titus 2:14 talks about Jesus “who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works”. We are called to pursue good works and live a holy life precisely because we have *already* been purified, set apart as holy, by God in Christ, because of Christ’s atoning work.

Theologian John Murray called this “definitive sanctification”, the holiness we already possess truly and absolutely in Christ.<sup>61</sup> It doesn’t remove from us the obligation to live lives of obedience to God, but it does *completely* change our motivation for holy living. We pursue holiness out of gratitude to the one who has *already* adopted, cleansed, and embraced us as his beloved children. So all this talk of pursuing God as if we didn’t already have him (or rather, as if he didn’t already have us) in Christ undercuts what the Bible says, and it produces an unholy anxiety in believers. It morphs God into a strict cosmic headmaster, “You kids better measure up or I’ll expel you so fast...”<sup>62</sup> But the Bible is clear: we pursue God in the security of the knowledge that he has pursued and found us first in Christ. That’s the gospel.

Granted that this is *not* something all Christians agree on, but it is something about which that most traditions coming out of the Reformation concur.<sup>63</sup> Holiness is something we strive for in

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<sup>61</sup> See John Murray, “Definitive Sanctification” in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 2: Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Carlisle, PA/Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991). See also his *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955). For a helpful short article on sanctification, and its perpetual incompleteness this side of glory, see Mark Galli, “Real Transformation Happens When?” *Christianity Today*, 29 May 2014, available online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/may-web-only/real-transformation-happens-when.html> (accessed 15 February 2015).

<sup>62</sup> Think of Principal Snyder from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

<sup>63</sup> Despite Dreher’s attempts to make the Benedict Option ecumenical, his insistence that the prime mission of the community should be the “search for holiness” may reveal a reliance on

practice, but it is also simultaneously something we already possess perfectly in Christ. The goal of the Christian life, then, is to bring glory to God by striving to live out who we really are in Christ, relying on the power of the Spirit.

Gardener: OK, interesting theological digression. But what's the point? And how is this relevant to what we're talking about: the real mission of the church?

Turnau: This understanding of holiness is absolutely relevant here. It's the promise of a sanctifying, sovereign grace that makes all the difference. If you *already* have the holiness God requires (in Christ), then there is absolutely no competition between your everyday pursuit of holiness and reaching out to love others (and cultural engagement as lessons in how to understand their world).

Gardener: But doesn't the surrounding culture still undermine that *pursuit* of everyday holiness? Can you really be holy watching *Jessica Jones*, even if you do it for all the right reasons? I've heard about that show and all of the sex scenes and so on. Cultural engagement is just not worth it. You end up polluting yourself.

Turnau: Well, first, *Jessica Jones* is a pretty awesome show. And second, there's nothing saying that you can't skip forward through the sexy schmexy stuff. But, to your point: sure, why can't a Christian benefit from a show like that? I'm learning tons about what the non-Christian world (or at least one Marvel-inspired segment of the non-Christian world) thinks about heroism, moral debt, true goodness, mercy, vengeance, gender roles, friendship, and so much more! The main character moves throughout the show with this heaviness, this guilt and burden. What if she really understood the gospel? How would it change her attitude towards life, her self-hatred and self-

peculiarly Eastern Orthodox theology in which the Spirit is not given by grace, but rather must be earned and acquired through sacrament, prayer and good works. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian Orthodox elder St. Seraphim of Sarov put it this way:

Prayer, fasting, vigils, and all other Christian practices, however good they may be in themselves, certainly do not constitute the aim of our Christian life: they are but the indispensable means of attaining that aim. *For the true aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God.* As for fasts, vigils, prayer, and almsgiving, and other good works done in the name of Christ, they are only the means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God. Note well that it is only good works done in the name of Christ that bring us the fruits of the Spirit. (*On the Acquisition of the Holy Spirit*, cited in Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new ed. [New York: Penguin, 1997 [1963]], 230.

In other words, the Holy Spirit isn't given to Christians by grace, earned by Christ's sacrificial work. He must be *acquired*, earned through our own disciplined efforts in fasts, vigils, prayer, almsgiving, etc. They are the ticket that grants us access into the saving presence of the Holy Spirit.

destructive behaviours? It makes me appreciate the gospel all the more.

Further, I don't believe engaging (and even enjoying) non-Christian culture necessarily jeopardises holiness. And it certainly doesn't jeopardise our salvation, as some might think. Pastor/author Mike Cospers wrote a really good book on popular culture, and toward the beginning, he says (*whips out his copy and flips quickly through the pages*):

It's the promise of grace that propels us out into the world without the fear of the Church Lady. While our stories [from TV and movies] are indeed shaping our hearts and imaginations, they cannot do any permanent damage to those who are in Christ. In other words, you're not going to watch a movie that will steal your soul; the world can't really hurt you. Instead, you can take comfort in knowing that you're forever secure in the hands of Jesus.<sup>64</sup>

No doubt navigating popular culture and pursuing holiness is tricky. I think the key lies in being honest and wise about the strengths and weaknesses of your own heart (and listening to them), as well as being critically aware and gospel-grounded deeply enough to see through the culture's deceptions, the Emperor's New Clothes promises of the mainstream culture. And a big part of gospel grounding is knowing our holiness in Christ, that God embraces us and invites us to deeper intimacy, rather than setting the bar so high that only the very holy, the marathon runners of religion (monks, priests, saints, missionaries) can truly know him.

So in sum, I think there's some confusion surrounding the issue of Christian holiness. Walling ourselves off from mainstream culture isn't the way to go about it, at least if we want to obey Jesus. As he said in John 17:14-19, his disciples are called to go *into* the world. We're called to our cultures. Our true holiness is to be found in engaging, not withdrawing.<sup>65</sup>

Gardener: I'm not altogether convinced. Seems like a person should always set the pursuit of God through holiness *over* outreach to others. Loving God still trumps all other loves.

Turnau: But what I've read in the Bible (and in my experience) shows that love for God and love for others are not in competition. Neither

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<sup>64</sup> Mike Cospers, *The Stories We Tell: How TV and Movies Long for and Echo the Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), Kindle edition, loc. 672-675. The Church Lady is a character played by *Saturday Night Live's* Dana Carvey lampooning nose-y, judgmental, suspicious Christians.

<sup>65</sup> For a helpful treatment of this passage and its application to culture, see Arturo Azurdia, *Connected Christianity: Engaging Culture without Compromise* (Fearn, Scotland/Bridgend, Wales: Christian Focus/Bryntirion Press, 2009).

“trumps” the other. Rather, they go hand-in-hand, or not at all. In 1 John 4:7-12, John writes that true love for God is expressed *through* true love for others. They dovetail into one another: if you love others, God’s love is in you. If you’re not loving others, you’re not loving God. And *that* is the very definition of Christian holiness: loving engagement, not withdrawal. Christian holiness that is established by grace alone (and not by our diligent practice of ascetic disciplines)<sup>66</sup> will necessarily flow outward to others.

The character of gospel holiness is one of generously pouring ourselves into the lives of those around, just as Christ generously poured out his life for us and served us so that we might become “the righteousness of God” (see Phil. 2:4-8, 2 Cor. 5:21). Far from being in competition, pursuing holiness and love for God *requires* love and service to others. 1 John 4 is quite clear: any holiness that does not express itself in love for other human beings is a sham holiness, a sham love for God. You cannot have one without the other. The love of God is properly expressed *through* the love of others, even others in the world.<sup>67</sup>

Gardener: You think we’re a bunch of hypocrites and Pharisees?

Turnau: I didn’t say that, but I think legalism and pride can be a temptation for even the best intentional communities. And the only sure antidote is the gospel, an understanding that even our holiness is by grace alone. It comes from “God who works in us”, according to Paul in Philippians 2:13. Therefore, contact with non-Christians or their culture is no threat. In fact, it helps us understand them and love them better through word and deed, as good ambassadors should (2

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<sup>66</sup> See Dreher, “Accidental”. Second on his list of characteristics of Benedict Option communities: “Second, it should be disciplined, and ascetically oriented, because asceticism trains the passions.” Practical advice, surely, but cf. Colossians 2:23 where Paul comments on ascetic rules: “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” What separates helpful spiritual disciplines from useless ascetic practices is the gospel, which grounds our holiness. If that is not understood, ascetic practice leads either to Pharisaical pride (for rule keepers) or self-loathing (for those who fail to live up to the rules). See Tim Keller, “Religion and the Gospel”, in *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

<sup>67</sup> Some Christians who favour cultural withdrawal may point to verses such as 1 Corinthians 15:33, “Do not be misled: bad company ruins good morals.” But if Paul means for the Corinthians not to associate with non-Christians, he is contradicting what he himself said ten chapters earlier (5:9-10), and he is issuing a command out of keeping with the model Jesus himself laid down. Jesus had a disturbing tendency to hang out with disreputable, worldly characters (see Matt. 9:10-17). It is helpful to bear in mind that Paul is speaking here about false teachers *in the church*, not bad characters in the world. The ones who really had the potential to undermine the gospel and dash Christian hopes of resurrection were not non-Christians, but false brothers.



Cor. 5:20). In this way, engagement with the surrounding culture, even popular culture, flows from a holy love of God and people.

Gardener: I still think you're putting kids at risk. Why not wait until they are older, responsible adults, before exposing them to that stuff?

Turnau: Because trying to protecting children by erecting a hermetically-sealed subculture simply doesn't work. Shrink-wrapping our kids doesn't lead to their holiness. I read a pretty heart-breaking blog post from a young woman who was raised Evangelical Christian and has since abandoned the faith. She examines the Benedict Option and says, "Hey, that's nothing new. That's how I was raised: strong church, good teaching in the gospel, home-school co-ops. But it didn't work."<sup>68</sup>

Gardener: Why not?

Turnau: Because by the time she reached college-age, she had been so shielded from non-Christian culture and ideas, she had no idea how to interact with non-Christians. And worse, once she did, she found that her community had only ever told her half the story when it came to things like evolution, gay marriage, and other things. When she actually met a nice, committed gay couple, or evolutionists who had answers for the arguments she'd been taught, she walked away from her parents' faith. Sheltering our youth doesn't work because you can't shelter them forever.

Gardener: This proves nothing. Some Christian kids walk away from the faith no matter what their parents or communities do.

Turnau: True, and I wouldn't want to deny that it happens, nor the pain of parents and kids in that position to whom it happens. But given the choice between sheltering and training, I'll choose training every time. Why would I want to pass up opportunities to walk through tough issues, *real* issues, with my kids? *That's* how the wisdom of the Christian story gets passed down from generation to generation. If intentional community can do *that*, then I think it's on the right track. If it keeps parents and churches from doing that, then I think the community is squandering God-given opportunities and shirking God-given responsibilities. I want to be part of raising up a generation of ambassadors and artists who are culture-savvy people-lovers.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Libby Anne, "I Grew Up in the Benedict Option. Here's Why It Didn't Work." *Love, Joy, Feminism*, 1 October 2015, available online at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/lovejoyfeminism/2015/10/i-grew-up-in-the-benedict-option-heres-why-it-didnt-work.html> (accessed 15 February 2016).

<sup>69</sup> See Turnau, Burnett and Moore, "The Chief End of Gospel-Centered Parenting", in *Engage*.

Gardener: But you can't spend that kind of time *and* be intentional about community. You've got to unplug from one to be fully plugged-in to the other.

Turnau: I'm not convinced. There are many ways of doing intentional community that deepen the knowledge and practice of the Christian faith, and they don't all call for becoming disengaged from culture. Many churches have developed small group ministries, or retreats for communal bonding. The Wednesday night prayer meetings or Bible studies that are traditional in many Protestant churches for additional prayer or teaching do the same thing. The opportunities for regular hospitality, Sabbath rest, and forming friendships are endless. Christians can cultivate intentional community in all sorts of ways: a regular one-on-one coffee meeting, a mid-week small group meeting, a movie discussion night, support groups for those struggling with addiction, a theology-on-tap meeting at the pub, a mothers with toddlers play group, a group focused on feeding and sheltering the poor in their community.<sup>70</sup> My wife and I used to have a standing date every Thursday night with our church's children's minister to watch *The Simpsons* when it first came out so we could talk about the theological themes in it. It built our friendship, and also engaged culture. So like I said before, I am in no way against being intentional about the way we do church and build communities. But we don't have to build walls to keep culture out.

Gardener: (*Brows furrow.*) Wouldn't all this cultural engagement end up watering down the gospel itself? That's what I'm seeing in the Evangelical church: some bearded hipster in jeans behind the pulpit making movie references, all in the name of "relevance", "contextualisation" and "seeker-sensitivity".<sup>71</sup> We'd be better off just sticking to the Bible and our traditions. Let non-Christians learn *our* culture if they want to be part of us!

Turnau: Well, I certainly agree that we need to preserve the integrity of the biblical gospel. But if we completely ignore issues of contextualisation, we'll end up just talking to ourselves (which is a lot of what goes on nowadays anyway). Besides, you can't really

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<sup>70</sup> I particularly like James Smith's example of "Wednesday Night Wine" meetings (though I imagine some of my Baptist friends might not). See *Desiring the Kingdom*, 212. For more inspiration for intentional community-building within the Christian tradition, see Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010 [1997]), and Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, "Christian Practices and Congregational Education in Faith", in Michael Warren, ed., *Churches: The Local Church and the Structures of Change* (Portland, OR: Pastoral Press of Oregon Catholic Press, 2000).

<sup>71</sup> Dreher himself thinks that seeker-sensitivity is a major problem in the American church. It is cultural accommodation that undermines Christian culture. See Dreher, "Accidental", and "Way of Life".

avoid doing contextualisation. If you're not intentional about it, it's not that you're not doing it; you're just committing to doing it badly. Even if you want to "stick to the Bible", you must realise that your Bible is *already* contextualised. It brings a Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek book into the context of the English language. I mean, just try going to your neighbour and sharing the gospel (excuse me, το ευαγγέλιον) in Koine Greek and see how far you get.

Gardener: Translation is one thing, contextualisation is another.

Turnau: (*Slips again into teacher-mode.*) Is it? If we live in among people for whom Christian categories – sin, God, salvation, righteousness – are rapidly becoming empty or confusing, aren't we really talking about issues of translation?<sup>72</sup> The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer argued (persuasively, I believe) that any act of communication involves multiple "horizons" (expectations, conceptual categories, assumptions, desires, hopes, fears): the horizon of the speaker, and the horizon of the listener. In order for real understanding to take place, the gap between these horizons must be overcome by what he called a "fusion of horizons".<sup>73</sup> This fusion *is* a translation; connect the circuit between the horizons, and meaningful communication has occurred. If it doesn't, people simply talk past each other (which happens quite a lot). You can tell someone is paying attention to these horizons when he or she asks, "Wait. What did you mean by that?" It is something that happens constantly in biblical exegesis. And it needs to be considered when sharing the gospel.

That's why pastor Tim Keller (someone who knows a thing or two about communicating spiritual truths to secular, post-Christian people) defines contextualisation this way:

Contextualization is not – as is often argued – "giving people what they want to hear". Rather, it is giving people *the Bible's answers*, which they may not at all want to hear, *to questions about life* that people in their particular time and place are asking *in language and forms* they can comprehend, and *through appeals and arguments* with force they can feel, even if they reject them.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> On contextualisation as translation, see Mike Ovey, "Putting 'Contextualisation' in Context", *Oak Hill College* blog, available online at [http://oakhill2.ablette.net/blog/entry/putting\\_contextualisation\\_in\\_context/](http://oakhill2.ablette.net/blog/entry/putting_contextualisation_in_context/), and Graham Shearer, "Beavers, Magpies, and Contextualization", *Pelos* Tumblr blog, 29 January 2016, available online at <http://gjshearer.tumblr.com/post/138272640801/beavers-magpies-contextualisation> (both accessed 16 February 2016).

<sup>73</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1992 [1960]), 306.

<sup>74</sup> Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), part 3, "Gospel Contextualization", 89. The book is one of the better guides for contextualisation available. The master of contextualisation is Harvie Conn,

Contextualisation means looking for bridges, connections, places where the static that hinders communication can be overcome, all so that the gospel message registers faithfully in the conscious mind of the non-Christian. And it *can* happen without undermining the integrity of the gospel. Contextualisation is essential to Christian faithfulness in a post-Christian age, in a culture where the Christian vocabulary and categories have largely been lost. It means spending a lot of time with people who are strangers to the faith to learn their language.<sup>75</sup> Talking to a footballer in the Midlands isn't going to be quite the same as talking to a taxi driver in London. Talking to a banker in Birmingham isn't going to be quite the same as talking to a movie producer in Los Angeles. We don't typically think about our *own* culture in terms of missionary outreach and translation of the gospel, but we should, for that is the situation we find ourselves in with the post-Christian West. The gap in terms of assumptions between Christians and non-Christians is wider than we realise. So spending time with people *outside* our Christian communities is vital if we're going to get a handle on how to speak their language. That's our missionary fieldwork, if you will.

But good contextualisation also means listening to the culture, especially to its arts and popular culture. We need to listen carefully, charitably, critically, listening for what resonates with the gospel, and what grates against it, how things mean in these works. I think a healthy Christian life in this day and age is going to have to learn how to relate to both worlds – intentional community and post-Christian culture – in dialectical tension, even shuttling back and forth between them.

Gardener: Like a spiritual ping-pong ball, darting here and there, never at rest? No thank-you. I prefer rest, quite, solitude, stillness. This is where I find God. You can't find him in the maelstrom out there. (*Glances up at the approaching storm.*)

Turnau: I don't know that I'd call it a ping-pong game, and I certainly don't want to deny Christians seasons of stillness. But otherwise, why not

late professor of missions at Westminster Theological Seminary. See his *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), and his 20 lecture online course, "Contextual Theology", *WTS Resources* website, available online at <http://www.wts.edu/resources/media.html?paramType=search&keywords=contextual&speaker=70&ScrBook=&ScrChap=&ScrVerse=&ScrVerseEnd=&year=1984&srch=search> (accessed 16 February 2016).

<sup>75</sup> Keller, *Center Church*, chapter 10, "Active Contextualization".

acknowledge that we are called to live simultaneously in two worlds? We Christians live in eschatological tension, between the old and new creation. God hasn't brought the old world to an end yet, and there are still people there who need us. And there are still God-given blessings to be received from the culture out there. So, no, I don't think it's a good idea to sever ties. We need to keep a foot in both worlds, and be intentional about our faith as well. It's a stretch to be sure, but that's what's needed to worship God and love others in a post-Christian culture. At least until the Lord comes back.

Gardener: And you really think Christians can change the world – or, as you prefer, the imaginary landscape – that way?

Turnau: Perhaps. In small ways, and over the long-term. Unless God does something bigger and faster than we could anticipate. That would be fantastic. But if not, then we should be prepared for some slow, steady work ahead of us.

Gardener: And we couldn't accomplish the same thing over the long-term by just focusing on our own communities, being good models for those around us, and evangelising our neighbours that way? Won't that alone do the job?<sup>76</sup>

Turnau: Not really. Of course evangelism and being a godly model is necessary for witness to individuals. But if we wish to truly influence the world around us as God wants us to, we need to look beyond individual witness, beyond our lives within our own communities. Culture is more than a collection of individuals. Sin distorts the lives of individuals through guilt and relational dysfunction, but it also distorts whole cultural fields through structural corruptions such as racism, economic injustice, and biased representations in media.<sup>77</sup> Cultural sin patterns are more than a collection of individual sin-patterns. These warped patterns resonate throughout a society in ways that can wreak havoc in obvious and subtle ways (as your modernity-as-acid metaphor implies). And where the effects of sin are pervasive and super-individual, we should expect the effects of redemption to be just as pervasive. Redemption is not just individual freedom from guilt, but cultural healing from corruption.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See Dreher, "FAQ".

<sup>77</sup> By "corruption" I mean not just financial corruption (bribes, etc.), but the culture-wide effects of sin. See Greg Thompson, "The Church in our Time: Nurturing Congregations of Faithful Presence", New City Commons white paper, October 2011, available online at [http://denverinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/The-Church-In-Our-Time-A-New-City-Commons-White-Paper\\_4.pdf](http://denverinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/The-Church-In-Our-Time-A-New-City-Commons-White-Paper_4.pdf) (accessed 28 January 2016), 15-16. The whole essay is very helpful and worth reading.

<sup>78</sup> See Thompson, 17-21.

Bottom line: Personal holiness, one-on-one evangelism, inner-church community building; these are all essential. But they are not the whole mission of the church. We miss addressing that collective level if we just focus on our own communities, turning our eyes inward, so to speak. I think the imaginative life of the whole society has to be part of that conversation.

Gardener: (*Looking up at the dark clouds looming.*) The future just looks so unpromising at the moment. It feels so hopeless, as if our best efforts would be just a drop in the bucket, and at the risk of our own cultural survival.

Turnau: Has it ever been otherwise, really? Complete redemption and reformation doesn't happen in our lives or cultures. That shouldn't stop us from trying to engage with our culture in redemptive and healing ways.<sup>79</sup> Things may not change drastically or overnight. But given the reality of a God who acts in the world by his Spirit, we can anticipate substantial change. We have hope. We cannot give in to councils of despair. Thinking about and acting for cultural and social change ought to be squarely on the Christian agenda, despite our own declining cultural influence. In short, we ought to be thinking about sin and redemption not just on the individual level, but in their effects on cultural/imaginative/social structures as well.

My fear is that if folks like you turn inward, that changes the character of the faith itself. It stops being so much about loving people (that is, people unlike us), and starts becoming all about protecting us and ours. I'm not convinced that Christ was really that into self-protection. He was more into self-giving, and trusting his Father for the results. If we are faithful in living and giving out into the culture boldly, I don't think that Christianity is in much danger of evaporating. The more realistic fear is that it might wither and decay from within.

Gardener: So your vision isn't an either/or, either strengthen our communities or engage culturally. You're more a both/and kind of guy.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Some Christians (particularly Radical Two Kingdom theologians) object to the language of "redemptive" cultural engagement. They see it as a pre-empting of God's redemptive activity, as if our cultural efforts add something to our salvation (see Van Drunen, 56-58). No one, at least in the Reformed camp, argues this. Rather, it is in light of our already accomplished redemption (by grace alone) that we move out into the hurting world to bring (reflected) light and (mediated) healing. We are not the source of the redemption and healing; we merely attempt to be faithful with the resources given us (namely, our time, energy, creativity, and hope in light of the gospel).

<sup>80</sup> I appreciate Alan Jacob's comments on the Benedict Option that it is not primarily about withdrawal but about intentionality of institutional, relational and spiritual formation. This intentionality about formation (what he calls *Bildung*) may necessitate certain kinds of withdrawal, but that will differ from person to person. See "Withdrawals and Commitments",

Turnau: When I can be. So that's why I said at the beginning of our talk that I agree and disagree. I agree that the church needs to do a better job at teaching, training, and mentoring Christians of this generation and the next. And I agree that pursuing intentional community and deep relationships among Christians must be part of the equation. I just don't think that we need to disengage from the mainstream culture (even popular culture) to preserve our own Christian identities. Rather:

- When we critically engage our culture, the Christian story comes more clearly into focus so that we can worship God better.
- When we understand our holiness as a gift of grace, when we understand ourselves secure in God's love, our Christian calling to love is strengthened. We can live out the holy love that we *already have* in Christ for the benefit of others.
- When we understand that the two great loves – love for God and love for others – are not in competition, but rather they dovetail into each other, it frees us. We can move out into the lives around us, engaging culture to help us learn how to love others more wisely, gaining insight into how to be a healing presence in our wider communities.
- When we understand contextualisation not as a threat to the gospel, but as a necessary part of sharing the gospel, the necessity of cultural engagement comes into focus as a part and parcel of good contextualisation.
- When we understand that sin and redemption apply not just to individuals, but to larger cultural and imaginative structures as well, it becomes clear that we need to do more than evangelise and be godly examples. We need to focus on broader structures as well, including the imaginary landscape that shapes the cultural conversations going on.

Gardener: What? You're not going to do the breaking-the-fourth-wall thing?

Turnau: Nah. It weirded out the Knight, so I decided not to.

Gardener: Yeah, it *did* seem a little self-consciously meta; something Abed Nadir would do.

Turnau: Wait. If you're supposed to be unplugged from popular culture, how do you know *Community*?

Gardener: (*Concentrates pointedly on weeding her dahlias while whistling an ancient Gregorian chant*).

### *Scene III: The Member of the Loyal Opposition's Dialogue*

The scene opens in a rather plain, shared office in an élite international publishing house located in New York or London. They sell serious fiction and issue-oriented non-fiction, not paperback bestsellers. We find the Member of the Loyal Opposition<sup>81</sup> (hereafter MLO) squirreled away in a rather plain office. A fluorescent bulb buzzes softly from a recessed ceiling light fixture. The only decoration on the walls is his degree from a well-respected university, and a family portrait of him, his lovely wife, and his adorable twin moppets. The MLO himself is preoccupied reading galleys. He seems a bit harassed. After all, he's in the middle of a busy day.

The MLO works in publishing, but he could be a young, tenure-track academic at another fine university, a junior associate at a prestigious law firm, a member of the public relations staff for an arts centre or metropolitan orchestra. In short, he's the type who is going places (but hasn't arrived yet) in culturally influential institutions.

MLO: (*Looks up, notices Turnau for the first time.*) Hello. Can I help you? (*Remembers suddenly.*) Is it time for our chat already?

Turnau: What are you doing here? I thought you'd be in the halls of Parliament or something?

MLO: It's *your* metaphor.

Turnau: So it is. OK, then, what's your deal?

MLO: Just as you see. I am trying to keep my head down and do my job to the best of my ability. I would prefer to stay centred on God, and if I can perchance make a difference in some small way, all the better.

Turnau: That doesn't sound very ambitious.

MLO: (*Frustrated, defensive.*) Oh yes? And what's the alternative? Consider how things have turned out when all the "ambitious" Christians take the reins. Have they changed for the better? I'd say not! As a social sector, Christians have become defined by our politics, our judgmental spirit, our censoriousness. We have thinned a rich and

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<sup>81</sup> In parliamentary systems of government, a member of the loyal opposition is a member of Parliament who seeks to work within the current system (controlled at the moment by another political party) even as he opposes the ruling party's initiatives. Here it is a metaphor for someone in a position of a cultural minority who is yet willing to work *within* the majority culture to attempt change from within.



complex cultural matrix down to these political battles.<sup>82</sup> Or we have played turtle and hidden away in our little pietistic holy huddles while the world goes serenely to hell.<sup>83</sup>

Turnau: Sounds like you've been talking to the Knight and the Gardener.

MLO: Look, they are *good people*. But as far as strategies for how one is to be a Christian within a post-Christian culture, well, they are sadly misinformed. Though I do think much of what the Gardener said makes sense.

Turnau: Which parts?

MLO: How real Christian spirituality is eroded under the conditions of late modernity, and the need for spiritual formation, building up Christianity as a distinct culture, the need for intentional community.<sup>84</sup> That sort of thing.

Turnau: So what do you disagree with her about?

MLO: I disagree with withdrawal from the surrounding culture, even "strategically". We need to stay involved, keep our heads in the game. But without illusions, you know? We're not going to bring massive changes into our culture, especially not with politics.

Turnau: Tell me, then, what's your alternative?

MLO: Two words: "faithful presence". We Christians have overreached in the past. We thought we could change the world. Alas, we cannot, or at least, not as we had hoped. Rather, we need to recognise God's faithful presence – incarnationally – to us in Christ. And by way of response, we should seek to be faithfully present first to God, then to each other, and to the world in whatever sphere of influence God has placed us. In this way, Christians practice a sort of incarnation, bringing God's blessing to bear in small, incremental ways in all sectors of mainstream culture, working for the common good.<sup>85</sup> Just as Jeremiah told the exiles in chapter 29: pray and work for the

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<sup>82</sup> Hunter, 105, "Politics subsumes the public so much so that they become conflated. And so instead of the political realm being seen as one part of public life, all of public life tends to be reduced to the political".

<sup>83</sup> Hunter, Essay II, ch. 5 on the Neo-Anabaptists, and 218-19 on the cultural paradigm of "purity from".

<sup>84</sup> Hunter, 226-230.

<sup>85</sup> Sociologist James Davison Hunter coined this phrase as an alternative to the typical American Christian stances toward post-Christian culture: "defensive against" (typical of the Christian Right; an angry, combative attitude which resists anti-Christian shifts in culture), "relevant to" (typical of the Christian left; an accommodating attitude towards the prevailing culture, seeker-sensitive, etc.), and "purity from" (typical of the neo-Anabaptists; an attitude of opting out of mainstream culture, seeking instead to build a purely Christian enclave, a separate existence). See Hunter, 213-19. "Faithful presence" is Hunter's alternative wherein the Christian seeks to be quietly faithful to God within whatever niche he or she has found in mainstream culture. See Hunter, Essay III, ch. 4, "Toward a Theology of Faithful Presence".

prosperity of the city to which God has carried you.<sup>86</sup> We need to be salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16) where we are, the way Jesus wanted us to be. And if in being faithful and committed to the common good we cause good to happen within post-Christian culture, so much the better!

Turnau: (*Gently mocking.*) Sooooooo, I can't help but notice that you're a galley slave...

MLO: (*Pointedly.*) At an *internationally known publishing house!* This place produces works that routinely have a massive cultural impact. Our books reach cultural élites and thus shape the culture around us. Granted, I am not a captain of industry... yet. But I bring light where I can by practising faithful presence where I am.

Turnau: So working here gives you opportunities to share the gospel? Is that what you're talking about?

MLO: Yes, of course. But that's only part of what I mean by being salt and light. By being a Christian within this industry, I can perhaps change things for the better in other ways. Cultural change happens through élite institutions and networks.<sup>87</sup> I have a certain area of responsibility and leadership, however small, and I can be faithful there. Cultural influence is "scalable", you know.

Turnau: What do you mean?

MLO: It scales according to position and location within the culture. It's not just for the big guns. Faithfulness in the little things can be as important in impacting a culture as being a captain of an industry.<sup>88</sup> Right now, I'm just keeping my head down, being faithful where I am, working for the flourishing of everyone.

Turnau: Can't argue with the idea of being faithful to God and loving others where you are. But... doesn't it bother you that a lot of those books, maybe *all* of them, argue for perspectives that are diametrically opposed to the Christian vision of what is good and true and real?

MLO: That's not under my control. I'm just called to be excellent in what I do. Hopefully, if I excel at what I do, they'll call me upstairs where I can wield more influence over decisions of what to publish. Will I be faced with compromises along the way? Sure, but that's the price of admission, isn't it?

Turnau: I don't know. I think I'd be pretty uncomfortable being part of a project like "How to Succeed in the Abortion Business in 10 Easy Steps!"

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<sup>86</sup> Hunter, 276-79.

<sup>87</sup> Hunter, 40-45.

<sup>88</sup> See Thompson, 42.

MLO: Don't exaggerate. We don't get many outrageously ugly titles like that. Mostly our authors present interesting arguments which, while not necessarily Christian, are well worth engaging.

Turnau: But when you do get the odd objectionable title...?

MLO: Well, I don't really have the wiggle-room to opt out, you know? I signed a contract. I'm a part of this business. I've promised to do my job faithfully, or I'll be made redundant, and there goes my chance for cultural impact. That's really the choice, isn't it? Either be part of what's going on in the culture (and so have a chance at being salt and light), or turn away from it and so seal your own exclusion (and lose any chance at being salt and light). I'd rather wrestle with these issues than sequester myself in some safe space where I will have no impact whatsoever. Or I guess I could choose to shout at those in the culture from the margins, hoping people will just change their minds.

In short, I would rather struggle and take my chances trying to be faithful within the power centres of mainstream culture than opting for having an easier time in a subcultural institution that has only marginal impact, like a Christian publishing house.<sup>89</sup> And if I do a good job here, I'll rise up the ranks and my influence here will increase.

Turnau: As will the pressures to compromise, right? You only ever have so much leverage to work for change, what titles will or won't get published. The higher you go, the more you'll be tempted to conform to the prevailing corporate culture to maintain your position.<sup>90</sup>

MLO: Well, it's not as if I must face temptation alone. I've got my church behind me. I've got friends there who also work in publishing. They keep me accountable and help me navigate the grey areas. We bounce ideas off each other. It's a great support network.<sup>91</sup> And through it all, I know I'm at least working towards the common good.

Turnau: Are you? You keep talking about the "common good" and "flourishing". Aren't these terms very much up-for-grabs? Can we even define the common good in a post-Christian world?<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> See Hunter Essay I, ch. 6, "The Cultural Economy of American Christianity".

<sup>90</sup> See Greg Forster, "To Love the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of *To Change the World*," in Collin Hansen, ed., *Revisiting Faithful Presence: To Change the World Five Years Later* (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2015), e-book, esp. loc. 503-595.

<sup>91</sup> See Thompson, 37-43.

<sup>92</sup> On this point, see Robert Joustra, "Whose Religion? Which Flourishing?" *Comment*, 17 February 2016, available online at <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/4792/whose-religion-which-flourishing/> (accessed 11 March 2016).

MLO: I get your point. In a fragmented society, common definitions and cultural meanings become slippery and open to debate. James Davison Hunter calls it “dissolution”.<sup>93</sup> People lose faith that words can truly represent reality, so common meanings fall apart.

Turnau: What he doesn’t mention is that things don’t just fall apart, but things fall together again into new patterns. Stories and cultural motifs shape the collective imagination, and that causes dissolved meanings to re-coagulate, if you will, to come together into new, distinctively post-Christian ways.<sup>94</sup> Think of an oil slick in a puddle on the sidewalk. Throw in a rock, and the slick breaks into smaller bits. But before long, they move towards each other and, gloop!, they’re back into a single slick, though perhaps in a different shape. The same happens with meanings within culture: they don’t stay perpetually scattered and fragmented. Under the influence of networks of narratives, songs, attitudes, images, styles, and so on, meanings come together and solidify into new shapes as well.

So when we start using crucial words like “common good”, “natural”, “freedom”, “flourishing”, “healing”, “wholeness” and “human rights” Christians don’t just have to navigate the dissolution of old definitions. They also have to contend with new post-Christian definitions as well. Things have not only fallen apart, but they’re coming together again in a way that leaves Christians on the outside. That’s why I’m so interested in popular culture.

MLO: Wait, what? Your train of thought just jumped the tracks for me.

Turnau: I think popular stories, images, songs, games – what we call “popular culture” – form networks of human significance that can become a major force in shaping the collective imagination, and so steering social meanings.

MLO: Are you kidding? New electronic media and popular culture have done nothing but trivialise our lives together. Are you seriously asking me to take this collocation of the bizarre and foolish as worthy of careful consideration? Things like X-Men and superheroes, Thomas the Tank Engine, Harry Potter, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Bart Simpson? These are works that simply will not sustain analysis. They are

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<sup>93</sup> Hunter, 205-10.

<sup>94</sup> Hunter asserts that post-Christian dissolution means we can fill words with any meanings we choose, leaving us with “the capacity to question everything but little ability to affirm anything beyond our own personal whims and possessive interests”, (206). I disagree. Popular narratives in film, television, song and game, allow that fragmentation to coalesce into new specific patterns that indeed affirm and provide solidity to new meanings, even if those new meanings often leave more traditional Christian meanings out of the conversation.

subpar offerings in a world that worships mere entertainment, making the world ever more banal.<sup>95</sup>

Turnau: Not banal: the world becomes re-storied along different paths, *including* paths of entertainment. Entertainment at its best (or worst, depending on your perspective) elicits a quasi-worshipful response.<sup>96</sup> It's a powerful and fascinating thing. Don't sell it short. I mean, look at us! We *are* having this discussion in an imaginary movie script. Entertainment doesn't *have* to be trivial. Furthermore, you can find a surprising amount of depth both in the works themselves, and in the imaginative investments the fans commit to those works. It may just be that "The geek will inherit the earth."

MLO: Intriguing (I am studiously ignoring your pun), but it seems obvious to me that what happens in the *élite* circles of cultural power – the fine arts, academia, research institutes – has a more decisive impact over the long term.

Turnau: I won't deny the influence of *élite* culture. But my point is that contemporary popular culture has the curious property of being both widespread *and* *élite*. These cultural pieces have a sort of grassroots appeal, but they profoundly influence the cultural conversation even among people at the very top. In so doing, they shape the imaginary landscape of the whole culture. In that sense, Hollywood and other centres of popular cultural production *are* *élite* institutions, at least in terms of cultural influence.

MLO: You'll have to make that case. I'm still of the opinion that it is largely trivial.

Turnau: I will a bit later. But there's one other thing that bothers me about this "faithful presence" strategy.

MLO: (*Sighs, knowing what's coming.*) What's that?

Turnau: It just seems really passive. It feels a bit like raising the white flag.

MLO: But it's *not* surrender, not really. We may have to surrender our dreams of empire and sweeping reforms, but we continue to seek incremental changes, small improvements that please God by working faithfully for the common good.

Turnau: But is that enough when anti-Christian sentiment has grown to this extent? Did you remember that story back from 2001 in Bournemouth? A street preacher was attacked by a crowd simply for carrying a sign that some felt was intolerant ("Jesus Gives Peace, Jesus is Alive, Stop Immorality, Stop Homosexuality, Stop Lesbianism, Jesus is Lord"). They beat him, threw dirt on him, and

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<sup>95</sup> Hunter is consistently dismissive of popular culture (part of his emphasis on *élitism*, perhaps?). See Hunter, 90, 208-11.

<sup>96</sup> See Turnau, *Popologetics*, 74-76.

when the police arrived, they arrested the street preacher for inciting violence under the Public Order Act 1986.<sup>97</sup> The courts seem more and more stacked with judges who have a certain distaste for Christians, at least in the UK. Doesn't someone need to speak out?

MLO: But if we just carry placards and shout, we automatically are shown to the exit from any cultural sphere that matters. I know I'd lose my job.

Turnau: Well, maybe it doesn't fall just on you, but on your pastor, your councillor, the lawyers in your church, Christians working in arts and entertainment, and so on. Maybe just practicing faithful presence for the common good (a common good that no one is quite sure how to define) isn't enough.

MLO: What do you propose, and how does it not end with Christians either being so obnoxious and triumphalist that we end up undermining our own cultural influence, or so defeatist that we throw in the towel and retreat into our walled gardens?

Gardener: (*Off camera.*) Hey!

Turnau: (*Ignores her.*) Pastor Vernon Pierre wrote a really thoughtful piece in which he said we need more than faithful presence; we need "faithful *prophetic* presence".<sup>98</sup> We need to do more than keep relatively mum as we level grind<sup>99</sup> our way inch-by-inch into positions of influence by working quietly for the common good. Pierre looks to figures from the Bible as well as the American Civil Rights movement to give us a model of how a culturally marginalised minority can possibly change things over time. Faithful presence is necessary, but so is speaking up prophetically against the current system.

He describes three levels of faithful prophetic presence, three types of prophets: "Court prophets" are those who have attained places of cultural influence, like you're trying to do in this publishing house. Consider Nathan, Isaiah or Daniel, in the Bible, and those who networked within the system to end racial discrimination in the Civil

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<sup>97</sup> See Paul Diamond, "England's Repressive Tolerance", *First Things*, December 2012, available online at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/12/englands-repressive-tolerance> (accessed 27 February 2016).

<sup>98</sup> The following paragraphs are derived from Vernon Pierre, "Faithful Presence Needs Prophets", in *Revisiting Faithful Presence*, and his interview with Collin Hansen, "Faithful Presence Needs Prophets: An Interview with Vernon Pierre", *The Gospel Coalition*, 17 November 2015, available online at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/faithful-presence-needs-prophets> (accessed 27 February 2016).

<sup>99</sup> "Level grinding" is a term used in discussing video role-playing games. It means to tediously repeat actions over and over in order to gain skill, experience points, money or items to get your character to the next level. See "Level Grinding", *TV Tropes* website, available online at <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LevelGrinding> (accessed 27 February 2016).

Rights movement. Court prophets sometimes have to compromise to stay “in court”. After all, Daniel and his friends learned the language and the culture of pagans. Their job was to give wise advice to the very king who had attacked and deported their people. They actively supported the system that oppressed them – that’s a *huge* compromise, some would even say treason. As you said, that’s the price of admission. Nevertheless, they were faithful to God within those positions. And sometimes, when their superiors crossed a line, Daniel and company had to take a stand. For current-day court prophets, taking a stand while working within the system runs the risk of being shown the door. Daniel risked the Lion’s Den, and his friends risked the fiery furnace; part of the gig.

“Wilderness prophets” (John the Baptist, Martin Luther King) speak from outside positions of power. They can be more direct and provocative. But like the court prophets, their outspokenness carries with it a great deal of risk. It cost John his head, and King was gunned down. But King’s voice was heard because he drew deeply from the Bible as he addressed the conscience of the American people for their good, as well as the good of African-Americans. He didn’t represent a special interest group, and he never took a bitter or angry tone. He spoke as one who loved even those who opposed him, but without letting them off the hook. He was, as Pierre says, “aggressively gracious” rather than Pharisaiically judgmental.

Finally, “exile prophets” (Ezekiel, and in the Civil Rights movement, Pierre mentions James Baldwin)<sup>100</sup> are those prophets who speak mostly to the community in exile. Ezekiel’s job was not to confront the mainstream cultural powers-that-be. Rather, he was called to stir the marginalised people up to faithfulness, to love, and to wisdom in a difficult time.

MLO: Hmmmm. So you have in mind something more, erm, *pointed* than simply being faithful to God and working for the common good where we are.

Turnau: Pointed, *and* generative (as Fujimura defines it).<sup>101</sup> Not just argumentative, but something self-giving, generous of spirit, embracing and vulnerable. Something that opens a path to conversation and reconciliation.

As important as faithful practice is, there are times when we need to intentionally speak up prophetically, imaginatively, for the common good (as God defines it, biblically) whether in court, in the

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<sup>100</sup> Pierre, “Interview”.

<sup>101</sup> See Makoto Fujimura, *On Becoming Generative: An Introduction to Culture Care* (New York: Fujimura Institute/International Arts Movement, 2013).

wilderness, or in exile. These three levels of prophetic witness could come through any number of media: direct verbal address (speeches, interviews, sermons), but also more indirect and creative ways as well (song, image, story, film, game). Because we believe in God's common grace, that God is still active in the world restraining sin, preserving truth and goodness, allowing beauty to take root and flower, we are still called to bring our faith to bear on what we do in the cultural arena. The cultural mandate as a prophetic witness still stands.<sup>102</sup> Our faithful presence within culture should be marked with a "holy impatience" to see the flourishing of Kingdom *shalom* spread throughout culture through our cultural works,<sup>103</sup> even as we take the long view, our sight stretching to future generations.<sup>104</sup>

MLO: Sounds risky. It's seems as though it would be awfully easy to fall into triumphalism once again. What's the end-game?

Turnau: Not theocracy, certainly. But certainly a society in which our cultural idolatries and self-destructive tendencies are softened, blunted. Culturally-active believers should serve as leaven to lighten things for everyone. Perhaps all these prophetic elements could work together to change the cultural narrative somewhat, or at least add a new leitmotif, a new voice to the conversation. And that could have a marked impact on restructuring the imaginary landscape.

MLO: I'll have to think more on this.

Turnau: Well, do it in the next scene. This shoot's on a tight schedule.

[End Part One – Begin Intermission Music].

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<sup>102</sup> See Vincent Baconte, "Beyond 'Faithful Presence': Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for Common Grace and Cultural Development", *Journal of Markets and Morality* 16 (Spring 2013): 202.

<sup>103</sup> Baconte, 202-03.

<sup>104</sup> Fujimura, *On Becoming Generational*, loc. 117ff.



## DIALOGUES CONCERNING CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT (PART TWO)

*Ted Turnau* \*

In this two-part essay, the author addresses the subject of Christian cultural engagement in a post-Christian context. In Part One (*Foundations 70*), the author establishes that cultures of the West can be characterised as post-Christian. He then explores the issue of engagement through a series of dialogues with different characters: 1) the Knight, who represents a political approach to cultural change, 2) the Gardener, who represents the Benedict Option espoused by conservative writer Rod Dreher, and 3) the Member of the Loyal Opposition, who represents the posture of “faithful presence” espoused by sociologist James Davison Hunter. Part Two (in *Foundations 71*) gathers the various characters for a round-table discussion. After pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each, the author lays out his own approach which focuses on imaginative cultural engagement using the arts and entertainment. He explores the issue of same-sex marriage as a case study, and the reconciliation between gay activist Shane Windemeyer and American Christian businessman Dan Cathy as an example of winsome engagement in which each discovered a common humanity in the other. Our goal is a cultural engagement that is an analogue to that kind of winsome reconciliation that creates space within which estranged parties can meet, or what the author calls “planting oases”. He then briefly considers two examples of this in the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, and U2’s Superbowl performance in February 2002.

### *Scene IV: Round-Table in the Drawing Room*

The scene opens with an establishing shot of an English manor (think: *Brideshead Revisited* or *Downton Abbey*). Dissolve to a crane shot of four figures observing each other sitting around an antique Edwardian cherry table in a richly furnished parlour. Thick burgundy wall-to-wall carpeting, a gigantic and ornate marble hearth surrounds a fireplace whose flames cast a warm glow over the room. Gilded mirrors and oriental prints adorn the ancient oak-panelled walls. The works. It is obvious that this is the kind of room where Matters of Great Import are decided. Imagine the room in which the culminating scene in a murder mystery unfolds, when Poirot gathers the

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suspects and walks everyone through the options until he names the real killer. *That room.*

Sitting around the table: the Knight in a dark 3-piece suit and power tie, the Gardener in more casual clothes appropriate for manual work (she's immaculately clean, but one can see dirt under her fingernails), the Member of the Loyal Opposition, still wearing his light blue oxford shirt and khakis, and Turnau in jeans, some random tee-shirt (connected with *Godzilla* or *Firefly* fandom), and a hipster-esque flannel overshirt.

Turnau: Thank you for all coming on such short notice to a meeting that very well might contain a good deal of monologue on my part. (*Knight, Gardener and MLO groan, roll their eyes, and mutter discontentedly.*)

Turnau: Hey! It's *my* imaginary movie. I'll chew the scenery as much as I like! At any rate, I wanted to tell you all that I think each of your approaches has something to offer, and each makes critical mistakes.

Sir Knight, I deeply appreciate your passion and the way you intentionally engage cultural issues in a way that strives to be biblical. I believe your insistence on politics as *the* fulcrum that will change the direction of culture is mistaken, as is your sometimes uncritical nationalism, triumphalism and dreams of restoring a Christian empire. But let's face it: we are political creatures, and Christians shouldn't simply absent themselves from the political process. Perhaps we can learn how to do politics in a new key, so to speak.

Mrs. Gardener, from you I learned the importance of preserving habits of the heart when they are in danger of being worn away by the corrosive patterns of late modern society. Intentional community, the church as she should be, is a vital and irreplaceable element in preserving the faith in a post-Christian world. I believe however that we can have intentional community, preserve what needs to be preserved, *and* vigorously engage the surrounding culture. In fact, I think such engagement sharpens and deepens our Christian commitments. Outreach and "upreach" toward God reinforce one another. Cultural engagement can be done as worship, making the gospel shine before our eyes as we hold it out to others.

And Mr. Loyal Opposition, from you I learned the virtue of quiet faithfulness and working for the common good within the cultural spaces where God has placed each of us. But while I don't want to "despise the day of small things" (Zech 4:10), I also don't want to plan only for small things. We can and should perhaps expect more, and speak out prophetically and imaginatively where we can.

Call me a naïve, sentimental fool...

MLO: *(Sotto voce.)* Naïve, sentimental fool. *(Beat. Turnau glares at him.)* What? You *literally* asked for it.

Turnau: *(Continues undaunted.)* Call me a naïve, sentimental fool, but I still think that change in culture is possible. God can transform things, and he can use us to do it. There are elements each of you brings to the table: strong proclamation, intentional community, quiet faithfulness in culture. Real cultural engagement is going to need to draw from each of your wells. But it seems to me that all of you are missing a vital piece of this puzzle crucial to cultural engagement.

*(Dramatic pause.)*

The role of the arts and entertainment! Imaginative engagement with popular culture!

Knight: Popular culture? That black beast that has polluted the minds of our young for too long? That Babylon that we can't reform, only boycott?

Gardener: I'm inclined to agree with the Knight (amazingly). Popular culture is precisely *why* we need a strategic withdrawal. It infiltrates the soul and destroys real Christian culture. It undermines real worship with its seeker-sensitive worship-as-entertainment, church-as-business model.

MLO: It's a plebian waste of time that only leads to the trivialisation and loss of meaning in real culture.

Turnau: I get it. I know you all have problems with it because you see it as a corrupting influence, a corrosive bile that erodes spiritual seriousness. But by being dismissive or alarmist about popular culture, you're missing a big part of the real problem, and a big part of the solution. Let's take the same-sex marriage debate as a case-study.

*[Title appears on screen for three seconds, documentary style.]*

### **Popular Culture, Imagination and the Same-Sex Marriage Debate**

Before I launch into my exposition about the same-sex marriage debate and cultural engagement, I want to say something that I shouldn't need to say: Christians should avoid homophobia like the plague, right? Hateful, mocking, or dismissive attitudes toward LGBT people should have no place within the Christian community. Agreed?

Gardener: Agreed.

MLO: Agreed.

Knight: Agreed. But I've been called homophobic for just taking a stance that gays disagree with. What about that?

Turnau: I completely understand. It's impossible to please everybody, especially in a heated cultural debate such as this. I'm talking about "so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18). I believe it is possible to profoundly disagree with some of the cultural positions the LGBT community take, *and* respect them. More than that: to love them (more on engagement in love a little later). What they call us is not up to us, right? But for our part, we want to love and respect them, right?

Knight: Got it.

Turnau: Now that that's out of the way, I can begin. (*Knight, Gardener, and MLO settle into their chairs.*)

In a recent essay, legal scholar Hunter Baker, like a lot of Christians, looked on in bewilderment at the lightning-quick shift in public opinion. "I can't easily explain how something that was an overwhelmingly dominant view for thousands of years has now become the greatest black mark against the church, but it has."<sup>1</sup> Something that seemed so solid – the traditional definition of marriage – suddenly collapsed and was remade before our eyes. Surveys support this feeling of cultural whiplash. There has indeed been a rapid sea-change in public opinion from 1996 to 2015:

- In 1996, when asked the question "Should marriages between same-sex couples be valid?" 68% of Americans responded no, and 27% responded yes.
- In 2015, they were asked the same question, but the positions had flipped: 37% said no, and 60% said yes.<sup>2</sup>

In less than 20 years, the approval rating for same-sex unions more than doubled, and the negative rating almost halved. Approval rates rose in virtually every demographic group regardless of age, religion (including Evangelicals), sex or political affiliation.<sup>3</sup> Within the last 10 years (2005-2015), approval rates climbed from 37% to 60%.<sup>4</sup> The data is, at first glance, baffling. How could a reversal of such an ancient and established perspective be abandoned virtually

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<sup>1</sup> Hunter Baker, "Can Christians Change the World after Obergefell?" in *Revisiting 'Faithful Presence': To Change the World Five Years Later*, ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2015), available online at [https://tgc-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/eBooks/Revisiting 'Faithful Presence'.pdf](https://tgc-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/eBooks/Revisiting%20Faithful%20Presence.pdf) (accessed 2 December, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Justin McCarthy, "Record High 60% of Americans Support Same-Sex Marriage", *Gallup* website, 19 May 2015, available online at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/183272/record-high-americans-support-sex-marriage.aspx> (accessed 2 March, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> "Changing Attitudes on Gay Marriage", *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life*, 29 July 2015, available online at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/07/29/graphics-slideshow-changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/> (accessed 2 March 2016).

<sup>4</sup> McCarthy, "Record High".

overnight? The shift in public opinion was simply too fast to be a generational change.<sup>5</sup>

Gardener: Oh, do let me guess – popular culture played a significant role, yes?

Turnau: Absolutely. It's not the whole story, but we'll start with gay involvement in the entertainment industry. James Davison Hunter says this about the gay community: "At most 3 percent of the American population, their influence has become enormous... far disproportionate to their size."<sup>6</sup> He mentions popular culture in passing, but it seems to me that gays in the entertainment industry have played a key role in the public acceptance, legalisation, and eventual celebration of same-sex unions.

I won't make you sit through a detailed history of gay representation, how the "love that dare not speak its name" morphed into an overall cultural acceptance (and even celebration) of same-sex relationships as the new normal.<sup>7</sup> But here's the big picture: for the last 20-plus years, the number of gay characters portrayed in film and television (followed by comic books and popular song) has climbed steadily, and as a parallel development, approval ratings for same-sex marriage climbed steadily as well.<sup>8</sup>

These new roles for gays were not stock characterisations, whether of the effeminate, over-the-top camp comic relief (such as the homeless cabaret singer in 1991's *Fisher King*) or the terrifying lesbian killer-whore (as in 1992's *Basic Instinct*). Rather, these new gay characters were smart, serious, playful, witty, sympathetic, supportive, successful, complex – characters like lawyer Will Truman (from the American situation comedy *Will and Grace*), councilman

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<sup>5</sup> I am speaking specifically to the American situation, but a parallel rapid transformation in cultural norms has occurred in Britain. See Brendan O'Neill, "Gay Marriage: The Fastest-Formed Orthodoxy Ever?" *Spiked-online*, 31 March 2014, available online at <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/gay-marriage-the-fastest-formed-orthodoxy-ever/14855#.VtlfZfkrjD8> (accessed 4 March 2016). Hopefully, my comments apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the UK (just change "Hollywood" into "the BBC").

<sup>6</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20.

<sup>7</sup> For a list of significant moments of gay representation in television and film, see Scott Collins and Meredith Blake, "Years before Court Ruling, Pop Culture Shaped Same-Sex Marriage Debate", *Los Angeles Times*, 27 June 2015, available online at <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-st-0628-media-gay-marriage-20150628-story.html> (accessed 2 March 2016).

<sup>8</sup> See Angela Wattercutter, "How Pop Culture Changed the Face of the Same-Sex Marriage Debate", *Wired*, 27 June 2013, available online at <http://www.wired.com/2013/06/pop-culture-same-sex-marriage/> (accessed 2 March 2016). A graph featured in the article (and provided by GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) showed a steady increase in gay characters in television, from 26 in 2003, to 111 in 2012. And with the rise in number of gay characters, the approval rating for same-sex marriage also rose steadily.

Harvey Milk (from the eponymous film), rodeo cowboy Jack Twist (*Brokeback Mountain*), talented singer Blaine Anderson (from *Glee*) and many, many more. In other words, these were ordinary (or extraordinary) three-dimensional people just like you and me, but they happened to be gay. And these characters were caught up in plotlines that had viewers rooting for them, identifying with them. The American audience became familiar with gay faces (both fictional and real, as certain celebrities came “out of the closet”), and what had been widely seen as a perversion was humanised into simply an alternative orientation.

Representation in popular culture *matters*. According to a GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) survey conducted in 2008, 34% of the respondents said seeing same-sex characters on television helped change their views (and 29% were influenced by seeing gay characters in films). In a 2012 survey by the *Hollywood Reporter*, 27% of responders said that seeing LGBT characters on television shows influenced them to support same-sex marriage (6% said it influenced them against it). For under-35 respondents, the percentage that was influenced to be pro-same-sex marriage was much higher.<sup>9</sup> And once the tide of public opinion turned, so did the politicians. Days before President Obama came out in favour of same-sex marriage, Vice President Joseph Biden said in NBC’s *Meet the Press* in 2012, “When things really began to change is when the social culture changes. I think ‘Will & Grace’ probably did more to educate the American public than almost anything anybody’s ever done so far.”<sup>10</sup> You could say that the same-sex wedding staged in the season finale of *Modern Family* in 2014 presaged the Supreme Court’s 2015 *Obergefell* ruling in more ways than one.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Tim Appelo, “THR Poll: ‘Glee’ and ‘Modern Family’ Drive Voters to Favor Gay Marriage – Even Many Romney Voters”, *Hollywood Reporter* 3 December 2012, available online at <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/thr-poll-glee-modern-family-386225> (accessed 3 March 2016). Both surveys are cited in William Douglas Leslie Clark, “Pop Culture Helps Change Minds on Gay Rights”, *The Seattle Times*, 1 January 2015, available online at <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/pop-culture-helps-change-minds-on-gay-rights/> (accessed 2 March 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in William Douglas Leslie Clark, “Pop Culture Helps Change Minds on Gay Rights”, *The Seattle Times*, 1 January 2015, available online at <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/pop-culture-helps-change-minds-on-gay-rights/> (accessed 2 March 2016). *Will and Grace* was an American sitcom that ran from 1998 to 2006 which featured a gay lawyer (Will Truman) who shared an apartment with his best friend from college, interior decorator Grace Adler. It was the highest rated show that featured a gay main character.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Fallon, “Modern Family’s Big, Gay (and Important) Wedding”, *The Daily Beast*, 22 May 2014, available online at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/22/modern-family-s-big-gay-and-important-wedding.html> (accessed 2 March 2016).

Knight: So what you're saying is: we need more Christian characters in movies and TV to recapture cultural momentum. We just need a healthy dose of representation of real Christians.<sup>12</sup>

Turnau: It's not that simple. Characters don't just leap onto the screen. They have to be created, to be written. Producers need to sign off on the idea that showrunners present. Writers need to come to agreement on what works, and what doesn't. It's a long process that requires many people who wield varying levels of creative influence, from network execs on down. If you look at these positions of creative influence, the LGBT community has had a really strong showing within entertainment.<sup>13</sup> There's just a huge talent pool of gay writers, directors and producers, people who are known and trusted by the heavy hitters of the industry.

Do you think this just happens? No. There is a process that takes decades. It starts with a substantial number of individuals who are dedicated to honing their craft and landing jobs. But that can only happen if there's "incubation", when the writers are surrounded by an enthusiastic and encouraging community that actually believes in what they are doing. In the conservative decades of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, gay writers were in college, sending out job applications, networking and finding connections in the industry, spending time, sweat, toil and tears trying to create something concrete out of their love of popular culture. I am certain that they met resistance and discrimination at the beginning.<sup>14</sup> But they had a slow, steady, long-term vision of creating an infrastructure, a network from within which they could eventually create messages and characters that would sway hearts, minds, and imaginations. It was a community effort over the long-haul.

All during this time, Christian leaders were raising the alarm about the "gay agenda".

Knight: (*interrupting*) Well, weren't we right? Wasn't there an agenda at work here?

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<sup>12</sup> This is the suggestion of Christian producer and author Bob Briner in *Roaring Lambs: A Gentle Plan to Radically Change Your World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), especially ch. 5, "Television: Fade to Black".

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Brian Jurgens, "The Backlot 40: Influential Gay Men in Television", *NewNowNext*, 23 October 2013, available online at <http://www.newnownext.com/influential-gay-television-producers/10/2013/> (accessed 3 March 2016).

<sup>14</sup> There is still concern within the LGBT community that, for all the gains made in television, Hollywood's film industry still displays disturbing levels of homophobia. See Tim Teeman, "What Is Hollywood's Big Gay Problem? Money and a Cowardly Lack of Imagination", *The Daily Beast*, 27 January 2016, available online at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/01/27/what-is-hollywood-s-big-gay-problem-money-and-a-cowardly-lack-of-imagination.html> (accessed 5 March 2016).

Turnau: Yep, but at least they *had* an agenda, and a creative, culturally engaging agenda at that! Can Christians say the same? Not really. Our relationship with Hollywood has historically been marked with either a dismissive attitude, or suspicion bordering on loathing. And the Hollywood people know what Christians think of them because we aren't exactly soft-spoken when it comes to our cultural dislikes. Who could blame entertainment industry powers-that-be for making it hard for Christians? "Who'd want to hire a conservative Christian? Those people *hate* us!" Hate and suspicion: not typically great for opening up networking opportunities. (Coincidentally, that very strident opposition by high-profile Christians led to a lot of terrible stereotyping of Christians in film and television. Judgmental, holier-than-thou sour old women or psycho-killer Christians, anyone?).<sup>15</sup>

Even if we *could* develop a network, what would we have to offer? The Christian community by-and-large does not develop its creative talent. We don't give our kids dreams of being writers, creators, filmmakers, and showrunners. We discourage them from getting too cozy with the world because we're sure they'll be polluted in the process. There's little to no support, no network, no enthusiasm, no understanding of imagination and creativity. It will take generations to undo the damage and alienation we've created before we can even *start* from ground zero. That's why you don't find many Christians in Hollywood. A handful of actors, a few Catholic directors like Malick and Scorsese. *Ex*-Christians, lapsed Catholics, Protestants who walked away during university... you find a lot of those.

Gardener: Well of *course* you find ex-Christians in Hollywood! You move into the belly of the Beast and you will find your outlook much changed. Contact with that world corrupted them and undermined their faith, obviously.

Turnau: For some, that's probably the case. But perhaps they succumbed *precisely because* they had no community support! Look, Christian writers and other creatives aren't super-Christians. They need people to pray for them, friends to ask hard questions to keep them accountable, to encourage them and be on board with them as they try to be faithful *and* do the job they were hired for. They need a

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<sup>15</sup> The stridently anti-gay rhetoric of many Christian leaders may also be responsible for turning off many of the under-30 population to Christianity. It is now cemented in the imaginations of many as the religion of intolerance.



supportive community.<sup>16</sup> For the most part, the Christian church hasn't been there for them. It doesn't even understand what they're doing in Hollywood in the first place.

Knight: But we do have creative people working in entertainment. Lots of them! And not in that moral cesspool called Hollywood.

Turnau: And where are all those Christian creatives working? In Christian-owned entertainment companies that are completely ignored by the mainstream culture. That's *not* being part of the overall cultural conversation. That's just making stuff to entertain your own people. It's the community talking to itself. It's fine for galvanising your own group, but really lousy for being heard by anyone else.

Gardener: That's because no one will let Christians into creative positions.

Turnau: And for good reason. Not only is there almost a century of hostility between the church and Hollywood, it's not as if a Christian writer fresh from college and looking for a job in television arrives at a level playing field. He will find the deck stacked against him in this post-Christian world of ours. The way most people around him see the world is diametrically opposed to his. They look at a Christian and see a dinosaur (and not a cool dinosaur like T-Rex or Velociraptor, either). They are suspicious of what they see as a fossilised morality. And that suspicion of Christians and Christian morality is socially entrenched, and has been for decades. So even if we manage to sneak a Christian or two into Hollywood, Trojan-horse style, it won't be enough. Not if we want them to be part of the larger cultural conversation.

MLO: So what else needs to be done? You are painting a pretty bleak picture.

Turnau: I mean to. So, two things need to be done. First, we need to recognise the cultural logic behind the current imaginary landscape. We need to understand the cultural currents that have been in place for a long time and within which something like same-sex marriage makes perfect sense.

Knight: What are you talking about?

Turnau: I'm saying that, in a sense, same-sex marriage was a done deal by 1950. (*The Knight scoffs.*) Hear me out. In the economically bountiful post-WWII era, people responded to the years of wartime deprivation by a concerted effort to make themselves prosperous and at ease.<sup>17</sup> And that attitude changed things in academia and in

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<sup>16</sup> One of the best parts of Greg Thompson's New City Commons white paper, "The Church in Our Time", is the way he underscores the need for the church to provide vocation-specific support for its members to find ways of being faithful *in the world*. See Thompson, 37-43.

<sup>17</sup> I realize that the post-war economies of the US and Britain were very different. For the States, it was a time of unparalleled prosperity shared over a huge section of the population. For

the therapist's (and pastor's!) office. A culturally significant number of scholars, psychiatrists and pastors stopped asking the complicated and difficult question of "What is true and good?" Rather, they asked the more immediate question: "What is good *for you*? What makes you happy and fulfilled?" According to Christian writer Joel Miller, Americans started redefining human nature: "We swapped the traditional American view, grounded in a certain pessimism inherited from the Protestant understanding of original sin, for the newly refurbished and Americanised psychotherapy."<sup>18</sup> The focus shifted from "What is true?" to "What makes for personal fulfillment?" So in the 1940s and 50s, these two innovations came together – the post-war commitment to comfort, and a redefinition of human nature and life's purpose – to form what historian Alan Petigny calls the "Permissive Turn".<sup>19</sup> It changed our cultural logic and paved the way for a later rapid shift in cultural norms. The "sexual revolution" of the 1960s and 70s was the natural unfolding of that cultural logic in the lives of the next generation. Same-sex marriage is simply the next step in that logical evolution. If the main goal of everyone's life is self-fulfillment, then why shouldn't we allow same-sex people to marry? It's fine, as long as they're happy, and as long as they don't infringe on anyone else's right to self-fulfillment, right?<sup>20</sup>

In a sense, America has been poised for same-sex marriage since 1776 when the *Declaration of Independence* announced the "unalienable rights" of everyone to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

**Knight:** But the Founders weren't for subverting traditional marriage! They meant something completely different when they said "liberty" and "happiness."

**Turnau:** I'm sure they did. They probably had in mind something that entailed certain responsibilities to family, community and civic duty. "Happiness" would mean living life as it ought to be lived, loving

Britain, it was a time of recovery and rebuilding. I would argue, however, the impetus toward consumerism and comfort was present in both contexts.

<sup>18</sup> Joel J. Miller, "Why the Gay Marriage Debate Was Over in 1950", *Ancient Faith* blog, 29 June 2015, available online at <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/joelmiller/why-the-gay-marriage-debate-was-over-in-1950/> (accessed 4 March 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Miller draws heavily on the insights of Petigny's book *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> And one can see the current debates over transgender identity as moving along the same logic. Not even biology or nature should stand in the way of my personal pursuit of what feels fulfilling.

your neighbour, that somehow your wellbeing was bound up in your community's wellbeing.<sup>21</sup> "Liberty" within a democracy meant not just freedom *from* restraint, but freedom *for* a productive existence, freedom to pursue a life well-lived. But those definitions changed in later years (cue Hunter's "dissolution").<sup>22</sup> The meanings of those key words were held in check for a while by echoes of an essentially Jewish and Christian ethic (including sexual mores). But gradually, those definitions were displaced by something more fragmented, more self-focused. The rule of the Robber Barons and the rise of consumerism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century took its toll, carving a landscape of consumer desire.<sup>23</sup> And during the 1950s, another seismic shift occurred at both the elite level (scholars, medical professionals), and within popular culture (images of prosperous, contented families abounded on television sitcoms and in advertising). The whole cultural narrative changed, and along with it, the logic behind cultural norms. Happiness and freedom now signify that each of us has the licence to live as he or she chooses, and no one can tell us otherwise. Because of that long-established shift in cultural logic, our arguments have to sail against a stiff wind, so to speak.

Knight: So argumentation is useless now? I mean, you make it seem so dire; an open-and-shut case.

Turnau: Well, I think we ought to modify our expectations in light of our current context. And we need to buckle down for a task that will take generations. One of those tasks is to radically challenge the prevailing cultural logic, to question happiness and freedom as they are currently understood. And that has to happen in the universities, in the therapist's office, in the churches, in recording studios, and in television, movie, and video-game scripts. It has to be a multi-pronged re-storying of our culture.

MLO: You mentioned two things. What's the second?

Turnau: (*Dramatically.*) And now I will show you a more excellent way: cultural engagement as love. What I mean is this: if we wish to really engage post-Christian culture, and those who create it and enjoy it, we must love both the culture and the people.

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<sup>21</sup> Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, "The Pursuit of Happiness: What the Founders Meant – And Didn't", *The Atlantic Monthly*, 20 June 2011, available online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/06/the-pursuit-of-happiness-what-the-founders-meant-and-didnt/240708/> (accessed 4 March 2016).

<sup>22</sup> See Turnau, "Dialogues Concerning Cultural Engagement", part one, Foundations 70, "Scene III: The Member of the Loyal Opposition's Dialogue".

<sup>23</sup> See William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

Knight: How can we as Christians love something that sows wickedness?

Turnau: Love doesn't mean agreeing with everything and everyone (otherwise, why would Jesus tell us to love our enemies in Matthew 5?). But it does mean that we're willing to enter into their worlds and listen, even as we seek change in the imaginary landscape that informs these post-Christian cultural narratives.

Once we see cultural engagement as an act of love, we will understand that cultural influence is *not* a zero-sum, winner-take-all game. We've been living so long in an "us versus them" mentality. Rather, we need a "we are for you" mentality. Without erasing the antithesis between our respective core commitments, we *can* engage those with whom we disagree in love. We can disagree with people without making them the "other", moral pariahs and lepers, lesser beings in our eyes. Rather, we recognise that we're *all* moral pariahs and lepers. We *all* need a Saviour. That's the gospel, right? We can bring healing by taking the low road of engaging in a humble, loving way.

*[Onscreen title.]*

### **The Story of Dan and Shane**

Let me give you an example of what I mean by loving engagement: the reconciliation between Chick-Fil-A president Dan Cathy and gay rights activist Shane Windmeyer. Americans know (though people in the UK may not) how in 2012, Cathy responded to a reporter's question (in an interview for Baptist magazine no less) about whether he supported the traditional view of marriage and family. Cathy responded, "Guilty as charged". He elaborated,

*We [that is, Chick-Fil-A] are very much supportive of the family – the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a family-owned business, a family-led business, and we are married to our first wives. We give God thanks for that... We operate as a family business... our restaurants are typically led by families; some are single. We want to do anything we possibly can to strengthen families. We are very much committed to that... We intend to stay the course. We know that it might not be popular with everyone, but thank the Lord, we live in a country where we can share our values and operate on biblical principles.<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> K. Allen Blume/Biblical Recorder, "'Guilty as Charged,' Cathy Says of Chick-Fil-A's Stand on Biblical and Family Values", *Baptist Press*, 16 July 2012, available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/38271> (accessed 7 March 2016).

Those comments, plus his company's financial support of groups that support a pro-traditional family agenda, caused him to be quickly labelled "anti-gay" and "homophobic", and there was much media outrage. This despite the fact that he is the president of a fast-food chain who has little or no political influence, not a culture warrior to be feared. The LGBT community fumed and boycotted. Christians took umbrage on Cathy's behalf, snarled right back, and started anti-boycott campaigns to make sure they ate more Chick-Fil-A products than ever. But very quietly, something else was happening behind the scenes.

Months later, a *Huffington Post* article came out authored by Shane Windmeyer, head of Campus Pride, a university-based gay rights organisation (and one the groups calling for boycotts against Chick-Fil-A).<sup>25</sup> In the article, Windmeyer related how Cathy contacted him, seeking a meeting to talk shortly after the calls for boycotts began. Windmeyer, suspecting shenanigans, was hesitant. But Dan Cathy was relentless. He texted Windmeyer, emailed him, called him, invited him to football games and family meals. Windmeyer did meet with Cathy, repeatedly, but not once during all this time did Cathy ask for Campus Pride to stop boycotting. He simply wanted to get to know Windmeyer as a human being. Over the months, the hostility and distrust melted and a friendship formed. Dan Cathy listened to Windmeyer's complaints, and compromises were reached. Chick-Fil-A would no longer fund groups that Campus Pride considered anti-gay. And Shane Windmeyer showed exceptional bravery in writing a very public essay that spoke well of a man that his community would rather vilify (just read the comments beneath the story). Both men took enormous heat over their friendship, but both men showed courage, openness and humility. Neither compromised his principles, but both discovered a new-found respect for the other and common ground on which to meet. That is cultural engagement done in love.

Knight: But Cathy caved, and got very little in return!

Turnau: I wouldn't call it "very little". Look at what *was* accomplished through this relationship. Did Dan Cathy's engagement with Shane Windmeyer somehow make Windmeyer less vocal in his advocacy of LGBT rights? No. Is there still a deep divergence between their moral visions of what America should be? Yes. So was nothing accomplished? Not at all. Through a difficult process of listening and

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<sup>25</sup> Shane Windmeyer, "Dan and Me: My Coming Out as a Friend of Dan Cathy and Chick-fil-A", *Huffington Post*, 28 January 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shane-l-windmeyer/dan-cathy-chick-fil-a\\_b\\_2564379.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shane-l-windmeyer/dan-cathy-chick-fil-a_b_2564379.html) (accessed 29 July 2014).

dialogue, both men had their imaginary landscapes broadened to accept the other as a human being worth listening to, worthy of respect and love. They will not agree on everything, but they have come to trust one another's integrity and good will. That is a huge step in the right direction. That kind of engagement has great potential to yield practical benefits in the long term for the good of the whole society, not just this or that particular interest group.

This type of winsome cultural engagement relinquishes claims of conquest over the land in the name of God. Christians need to wake up to the fact that we are not a moral majority. We are a minority voice in a land replete with a plurality of competing voices. Some of those voices are deeply disconcerting to us, and we understandably feel threatened. But they are *human* voices, voices worth engaging lovingly and respectfully. Our success or failure should not be judged on how well we have wrested the reins of power from our opponents to "recapture the culture". Our success should be judged by the humility with which we engage our opponents, how charitably we articulate our agendas, how gracefully we accept setbacks, how well we love our fellow citizens, and how well we demonstrate that we are *for* them, that we long to call them "friends". By taking the low road, we may find that we have more of an impact on the culture than by trying to coerce change through politics, or withdrawing into a safe-zone, or by simply keeping a low profile. We are not cultural conquistadors; we are not cloistered; we ought not to be passive. We are now the loyal, loving opposition.

Please note how Dan Cathy's engagement draws upon each of your perspectives. Sir Knight, did his action have a political significance? Absolutely. The discovery of common humanity between former opponents is a profound political achievement that paves the way for future dialogue. Mrs. Gardener, did the kind of habits of the heart learned in intentional community play a role in this exchange? Absolutely. The ability to extend grace in a humble, loving, persevering way develops only after years of Christian practice and discipline within community. Loyal Opposition Guy, was Cathy practicing faithful presence for the common good? Absolutely. The way Cathy stepped into Windmeyer's world and welcomed him into his world – that is absolutely practicing "faithful presence", living as if the gospel is real and can address the brokenness of society in a concrete way. But his love was also "prophetic" in the sense that it witnessed to both the brokenness and the remedy. What bothered him more than anything was the alienation and hurt that was in his power to heal.

And look at the fruit of that engagement. Whatever else Shane Windemeyer chooses to say about Dan Cathy, he can no longer call him a homophobe, a bigot, an idiot who just doesn't understand. He now calls him "friend". Cathy listened and loved well. That is a big part of engagement if we are going to be minority partners in the broader cultural conversation.

The moral: naked power politics that does not love our political opponents will not succeed. Withdrawal that does not engage will not succeed. Passively biding our time will not succeed. Lasting change comes only when we intentionally address the whole person, including the cultural and imaginative contexts of those who dwell across the cultural/political divide from us. The key lies in building bridges, not by forcing agendas.

Gardener: But how does this change the "imaginary landscape", as you call it? You presented some pretty compelling evidence that cultural works – characters in entertainment programming and such like – are instrumental in changing cultural logics and norms. How does a friendship with a gay activist change that?

Turnau: Well, on a small scale, a Christian man now shows up in at least one imagination as "human" and "relatable". Replicate that over and over and over again, not just with the LGBT community, but with transgender people and others we Christians generally find "outside the pale", and watch the cultural conversation change. Watch the Christian church shine with quite a different hue in the public square.

Gardener: But is it enough? Those popular cultural stories that create a new normal are still out there. The new norm stands, and that alone makes it harder to understand (much less believe) the Christian story.

*[Onscreen title, three seconds.]*

### **Loving Engagement in the Key of Imagination: Planting Oases**

Turnau: You're right. We need to rethink the way we engage culture creatively, imaginatively. We need a change in attitude so that we support Christians who work in the arts and entertainment. And Christian creatives themselves may need to rethink what they are trying to create. What I would like to see is... *(hesitates, thinking how to proceed)*... you know that reconciliation between Dan Cathy and Shane Windemeyer I just talked about?

Gardener: Yes?

Turnau: I want to see imaginative, creative cultural engagement that can make an aesthetic analogue of *that* relationship. I want popular culture

made by Christians to do what Cathy did, and to do it *as part of the mainstream culture*. I'd long to see Christian popular culture that's not about winning a game of cultural tug-o'-war. Rather, our popular stories, songs, film, television and games should create spaces for conversation in which we discover each other's common humanity, broken and needy, but also full of depth and wonder, created for glory. I call this kind of imaginative cultural engagement "planting oases". Christians need to take the initiative in creating culture that, like an oasis in a thirsty land, invites the parched travellers of the post-Christian landscape into a cultural space that challenges and refreshes, rather than one that manipulates and repels by its strong-arm tactics. I want to see cultural works that are "aggressively gracious as we seek to be a counterculture for the common good".<sup>26</sup> We want to be distinctive, and yet draw in those who disagree with us rather than chase them away. In that way, we widen and deepen the imaginations of those who may have started out alienated from us. *That's* generative, prophetic, creative planting of oases.

Knight: But will these "oases" really make any difference? It seems so... I don't know... ethereal and insubstantial. Not like legislation or court decisions.

Turnau: I believe they will make a profound difference. You're right in this, however: typically, a single story or performance doesn't do that much. But over time, as more are created, they can have a cumulative effect as they form networks that open up alternative ways of being and imagining ourselves in the world.<sup>27</sup>

Don't underestimate the power of stories told, performed, sung, and played in culture. They may *seem* ethereal, but, as Hamlet said, "We are such stuff as dreams are made of." We gain identity according to the story we imagine ourselves to be in. We all have "narrative identities".<sup>28</sup> These circulating stories, performances, songs, images and games are the background against which laws are

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<sup>26</sup> Vernon Pierre and Collin Hansen, "An Interview with Vermon Pierre", The Gospel Coalition, 17 November 2015, available online at <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/faithful-presence-needs-prophets> (accessed 27 February 2016).

<sup>27</sup> For an example of networking between popular cultural works, see Steven D. Greydanus, "We Need to Talk about Cartoon Parents", National Catholic Register, 1 December, 2016, available online at <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/we-need-to-talk-about-cartoon-parents> (accessed 3 December, 2016). Greydanus notes a common trope in CG cartoons which he calls "Junior knows best" in which the child has to break with tradition and parental authority to do some risky thing, and he/she is always right (ends up saving the village, etc.). This network of attitudes shapes the imaginary landscape of kids regarding how they understand parental authority and wisdom.

<sup>28</sup> For a philosophical exposition of this idea, see Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity", transl. David Wood, in David Wood, ed. *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 188-99.



made or unmade, courts decide one way or the other, people fall in love and families draw together or fragment. Stories form the imaginary backbone of culture, or what I've been calling, the imaginary landscape. Stories are really, really important. A Native American proverb says, "Those who tell the stories rule the world."<sup>29</sup> And those who tell different stories well can change it.

MLO: It sounds as if you're overselling the power of narrative.

Turnau: Am I? Well, I was an English literature major in university. But don't take my word for it. The celebrated science fiction writer Neil Gaiman went so far to suggest that humans are life forms, hosts if you will, for the transmission of stories.<sup>30</sup> Stories shape how we believe and live in the world, and they seduce us into telling and retelling them:

A lot of stories do appear to begin as intrinsic to religions and belief systems – a lot of the ones we have have gods or goddesses in them; they teach us how the world exists; they teach us the rules of living in the world. But they also have to come in an attractive enough package that we take pleasure from them and we want to help them propagate.<sup>31</sup>

Gaiman told about a Polish Holocaust survivor, his cousin Helen. Helen shared a story with him about how as a teen, she and a group of Jewish girls living in the Warsaw ghetto during WWII risked execution by reading a banned book, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. For them, the imaginative escape from the ghetto was worth risking death. The escapes we find in entertainment are anything but ephemeral and inconsequential. They are a powerful way of reshaping life. Gaiman concludes:

We [writers] decry too easily what we do, as being kind of trivial – the creation of stories as being a trivial thing. But the magic of escapist fiction... is that it can actually offer you a genuine escape from a bad place and, in the process of escaping, it can furnish you with armour, with knowledge, with weapons, with tools you can take back into your life to help make it better... It's a real escape – and when you come back, you come back better-armed than when you left.

Helen's story is a true story, and this is what we learn from it – that stories are worth risking your life for; they're worth dying for.

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<sup>29</sup> The quote has also been attributed to Plato. On the power of stories, see Shane Snow's fascinating Tedx talk, "Those Who Tell the Stories Rule the World", available online at <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/Shane-Snow-at-TEDxColumbiaColle> (accessed 9 March 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Maria Popova, "Neil Gaiman on How Stories Last", *Brain Pickings*, 16 June 2015, available online at <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/16/neil-gaiman-how-stories-last/> (accessed 9 March 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Gaiman, cited in Popova, "How Stories Last".

Written stories and oral stories both offer escape – escape from somewhere, escape to somewhere.

Look at our culture now. It is as it is largely because of the stories that have shaped it – from history and novels to films, songs and video games. It all adds up.

Gardener: But what difference can Christian storytellers make, even in popular culture, when so much of the storytelling is dominated by those with a very different vision of what the world should be?

Turnau: No, you're quite right. Christians by no means have a corner on the story market. And at the moment, the times when recognisably Christian stories shine are rare. Most of the time Christian stories are aimed at Christians. But if we rethink what the imagination is, its power and uses in a post-Christian world, perhaps more storytellers will become involved, and we as a Christian community will begin to speak to people other than ourselves. Given time and God's blessing, those stories can form networks, and those networks of stories can gather momentum, become leaven in the imaginary landscape, breaking up the dry desert soil. They become another voice in the conversation, another motif in the cultural symphony (even if it's at times dissonant, and other times harmonising).

I'm not saying it's the whole solution, but I think imaginative engagement with culture needs to be part of the solution, and it's a part that I feel has been overlooked for too long.

MLO: Can you give us some examples of the impact of distinctively Christian stories in mainstream culture? This all sounds a little pie-in-the-sky, devil's-in-the-details. Bring the pie down to earth. Show us where the devil hides.

Turnau: Let me give you two brief glimpses. First, take J. R. R. Tolkien's books. They had, and continue to have, a very broad appeal. And yet they are distinctively Christian in how they address a whole host of issues – heroism, good, fellowship, evil and so on. They have had a tremendous impact on how people have thought about the nature of goodness and the natural world. Tolkien linked the two, goodness and nature. He spelled out goodness in his stories in terms of rich, vivid imagery drawn from the everyday, natural world – things like the Shire, gardening, a good meal with friends, a quiet green forest.<sup>32</sup> These things belong to a world worth preserving from the likes of the rapacious Saruman (or a rapacious consumer-driven industrial economy). In Tolkien's books, the landscape *is* a full-fledged

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<sup>32</sup> See Jeffrey Bilbro (suspiciously close to "Bilbo"), "The Taste of Strawberries: Tolkien's Imagination of the Good", *Christ and Pop Culture*, vol. 2, issue 16 (November 2014), available online at <http://christandpopculture.com/capc-mag-volume-2-issue-16-beautys-allure/taste-strawberries-tolkiens-imagination-good/> (accessed 5 March 2016).

character, a creature that resonates with goodness because of the One who created it. The popularisation of his trilogy in the 1960s galvanised many in America and the UK into action to protect the environment. It convinced them that nature was worth protecting. In a sense, the environmental movement got its imaginative impetus from a distinctively Christian way of seeing the world laid out for all to see in Middle Earth. Elves and hobbits saved the day.

What about other cultural issues? Could a talented Christian writer create a vision of sexual goodness and contentment that was equally distinctive and inviting? A work that could acknowledge sexual confusion, brokenness, rebellion and hurt, but somehow showed a path beyond it to healing and contentment? I don't know. It's quite a challenge. But that's what we need at the moment.

The second example of loving cultural engagement is more recent: U2's Superbowl XXXVI performance in February 2002.<sup>33</sup> In the wake of the World Trade Centre bombing in New York on 11 September 2001, people in the US were hurting, angry and grieving. Then, on the most widely watched annual television broadcast in America, four Irishmen stepped on stage and became the voice of our grief and simultaneously gave us hope in the power of a love that defeated death. The halftime show started with Bono in the middle of a sea of fans making his way to a heart-shaped stage, singing as he pushed through the crowd. That is to say, he began in a position of identification *with* the crowd; there was virtually no distance between performer and audience. He was one of them. Given how our culture holds celebrities as latter-day deities, Bono's choice to start in the sea of fans speaks volumes and echoes the incarnation, how God became one of us.

The first song U2 played was "Beautiful Day", a song full of energy and exuberance, even as it addresses how life can seem futile and grey. The lyrics affirm that there is indeed a wonder and beauty in everyday life that lies just beneath the surface, so beware of letting yourself become bitter and hardened. You will end up missing the beauty. The band then transitioned into "MLK", a funeral song written for the slain civil rights leader, wishing him a gentle rest. And while the band was singing, a screen descended and the names of those slain on September 11 began to scroll upward, heavenward. U2 was, on public television, laying our dead to rest. I remember watching it and feeling chills. Fans wept. With the

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<sup>33</sup> If you haven't seen it, it's worth a watch: "U2's Powerful Tribute to 9/11 Victims", *Youtube.com*, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBzdittT3c4> (accessed 5 March 2016).

seemingly endless list of names still scrolling, they began playing “Where the Streets Have No Name”, a song about longing for a place where there is no hatred dividing people. Without naming it explicitly, the song affirms the hope of life beyond death.<sup>34</sup> At the end, Bono opened his jacket to reveal an American flag sewed into the lining. The message was clear: I might’ve been born in Ireland, but I am one of you. The whole show communicated not just solidarity, but empathy, love, a moving reminder of divine love incarnated, God with us.

*Rolling Stone* called it not only the best Superbowl performance ever, but

one of the truly great live-TV rock & roll moments of all time... Only U2 could have made this so grandiose, yet so emotionally direct. Grown men wept buckets. Every daft ambition U2 ever had, every lofty claim they ever made, they earned tonight.<sup>35</sup>

Did everyone catch the Christian resonances of the performance? Probably not. But it’s no secret that U2 is Christian, that their tireless campaigning on behalf of the world’s poor comes from a Christian perspective. That night, they brought a country together into a place of healing and told them that love conquered death, that it was safe to lay their dead to rest, that they could place hope in a future in which they are not alone. That night, U2 planted an oasis. I could go on, but I’ll return to examples (especially Tolkien) later in the book.

Knight: Wait, what? We’re in a book? Since when?

Turnau: I thought I told you. You guys are fictional characters in a movie script that’s within a book.

MLO: Does my agent know about this? Have we discussed residuals? I want gross points.

Turnau: You’re a *fictional character*. You don’t get residuals. Or points. Unless you’re owned by Disney.

MLO: Oh.

*Freeze frame. Triumphant music swells.*

### Conclusion

Voiceover (*either David Attenborough or Morgan Freeman*): Over the course of this video essay, we have explored options for cultural

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<sup>34</sup> See *Song Meanings* for the lyrics, and pay attention to the discussion after the lyrics. Available online at <http://songmeanings.com/songs/view/3998/> (accessed 5 March 2016).

<sup>35</sup> “Superbowl Shows Ranked from Best to Worst”, *RollingStone.com*, 28 January 2014, available online at <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/super-bowl-halftime-shows-ranked-from-worst-to-best-20140128/1-u2-2002-0479328> (accessed 30 May 2016).

engagement by giving voice and character to them: the Knight, the Gardener, and the Member of the Loyal Opposition. In bringing them to life, we were able to judge the strengths and weaknesses of each, perhaps shedding a little light through dialogue. Our journey concluded by presenting another path of Christian cultural engagement, a path that appreciated the other approaches, and yet went beyond them by focusing on lovingly engaging the imagination through art and entertainment. This is what Turnau means by Christian imaginative cultural engagement: creating works (and supporting the creators of those works) that address the imagination in a way that opens a space for conversation, reconciliation and relationship, imaginative works that resonate with grace. To do this, we need to be as committed to cultural change as the Knight, as committed to spiritual formation in community as the Gardener, and as committed to practicing faithful presence for the common good as the Member of the Loyal Opposition. But we also need to direct our gaze to the imaginary landscape, and to the works that form and shape it, such as popular culture. We need to be committed to creative work that seeks to reshape the imaginary landscape that lies back of the cultural conversations always taking place. Using the Christian imagination to love and heal a post-Christian world means planting oases in the wasteland.

*(Fade to black. Roll credits.)*